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G. Keilan Rickard

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GAY IDENTITY FORMATION:  
AN (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHIC LOOK  
AT GAY VOLLEYBALL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Clinical Psychology

By

G. Keilan Rickard

December 2011

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G. Keilan Rickard

2011

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G. Keilan Rickard

Approved November 18, 2011

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Martin J. Packer, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Psychology  
(Committee Chair)

---

Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Psychology  
(Committee Member)

---

Susan Goldberg, J.D., Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Psychology  
(Committee Member)

---

James C. Swindal, Ph.D.  
Acting Dean, McAnulty College and  
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

---

Daniel Burston, Ph.D.  
Chair, Psychology Department  
Associate Professor

## ABSTRACT

### GAY IDENTITY FORMATION: AN (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHIC LOOK AT GAY VOLLEYBALL

By

G. Keilan Rickard

December 2011

Dissertation supervised by Martin J. Packer, Ph.D.

From September of 2004 until May of 2010, I was part of the SCVL, a gay volleyball league in Pittsburgh, PA. At the same time, I was a graduate student, working to advance my status within the Academy. In this study, I use autoethnography to talk about my experiences at the nexus of these two institutions: the SCVL and the Academy. I take the reader through a year in the life of the SCVL (2008-2009) and discuss ways in which its perennial practices contributed to my gay identity development. Well, sort of. It hasn't always been clear to me the processes at play in the constitution of my self, but I try to figure some of them out in this dissertation. At the same time, I experiment with writing so as to A) perform the kind of subject I have become (am becoming), and B) challenge taken-for-granted practices and beliefs of the Academy which serve to reinforce a hierarchical system that propagates the effects of domination—over research subjects as

well as researchers. Along the way, I offer evaluative criteria for autoethnographic writing; I draw from Foucauldian theory to provide an archaeological, genealogical, and ethological look at gay volleyball culture; and I manage to evade veridical claims that would otherwise essentialize or reify gay identity. In the end, I argue for the benefits of gay sporting communities and call upon funding agencies to assist with the movement so as to improve the health and well-being of people marginalized for their non-conformity to gender or sexual norms.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the SCVL, the first gay community I've ever been part of. Thank you for your friendship. No. Your kinship.

By the power vested in me through no greater an authority than myself, I hereby confer upon each SCVL member, past, present, and future, an honorary Ph.D. in the science of community building. May you use it to advance your cause.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank Drs. Martin Packer, Leswin Laubscher, and Susan Goldberg for the ways in which they have challenged my thinking. I would also like to thank Dr. Fred Evans with the Center for Interpretive and Qualitative Research at Duquesne University for the 2008-2009 fellowship, enabling me to throw myself headlong into the culture of gay volleyball without starving.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction to Gay Volleyball

### Circumscribing My Precious Baby

It's high time I wrote this dissertation. For years, I've cranked out false starts, brain farts—the prelabor pains of a long and tedious birthing process. Now my cervix is fully dilated, the head is crowning, and the doctor is telling me to push. So it's time to push this baby out.

PUSH!! PUSH!!

I have great dreams for this little one. That s/he'll grow up big and strong. That s/he'll touch many lives along the way.

Over the past four years my baby has been gestating. I've ingested tons of material pertaining to my topic—gay volleyball. S/he's about as developed as can be inside of me. S/he's overdeveloped, in fact. Too big. I need to circumscribe.

Circumscription. What shall I cut?

I can't decide. So instead of stressing myself over what to cut and what to leave in, I'm going to see what comes of a little writing experiment: I shall write this introduction with no notes, no books in front of me. I'm going to pretend like I'm in an exam situation and give myself exactly one hour to crank out this introduction.

*What? That's ridiculous. What kind of crap are you feeding us?*

Trust me. It's much better this way. What I intend to cover are 1) the scope of gay volleyball throughout the world, 2) the history of gay volleyball in Pittsburgh, 3) literature pertaining to gay volleyball and gay sporting communities, and 4) what to expect from this dissertation.

This is a painful exercise, circumscription. I have to dispense with cherished ideas I've been developing for years.

This writing exercise, frustrating beyond belief. You have to deal with my lack of linearity; and linearity you've come to love, your being part of the Academy and all, assuming you're part of the Academy. Logic equals your best friend. But I'm subjecting you to illogic. Caprice. Word salad. Can the Academy allow for such a desultory style? Will my unorthodoxy threaten to undo centuries of academic tradition?

I doubt it. In the end, my writing will have been nothing more than child's play, the ramblings of a misguided graduate student, too big for his britches, in over his head. This work will find itself on a library shelf alongside hundreds of other dissertations (dissertatia?) whose content is dismissed as mere whippersnappery.

*Oh my! Keilan's taken to neologizing. He must be psychotic!*

Okay. One more thing before I start the timer. I had planned for my dissertation to rely heavily upon Foucault. My 2007 prospectus—and now my Abstract—even went so far as to say that I would do an *archaeology*, *genealogy*, and *ethology* of gay volleyball in Pittsburgh. (Talk about your Foucauldian buzzwords!) But as I have read and reread Foucault, I have determined that it is pointless to try and emulate his methodology. I don't understand Foucault (Rickard, 2009). You don't understand Foucault (Stevenson & Cutcliffe, 2006). Foucault didn't even understand Foucault (Foucault, 1969).

The point of Foucault was not to understand or be understood. Rather, the point was for him to ramble, filibuster a whole career, writing book after book in hopes that his prolific thoughts would eventually cohere. He was an academe, after all, and he played the game well. You know that game, the one where you debate another academe in

writing or in person, dropping as many smart-sounding buzzwords as possible, not sure what you're saying or whether you've even established a clear definition for any of your buzzwords, but continuing to prattle on as long as you can without interruption or stutter because holding the floor and keeping an audience's attention mean that you wield the truth insofar as you're plowing through it.

Right?

OMG, I'm so right.

In this dissertation, I plan to draw upon the spirit of Foucault while still allowing his thoughts to be incoherent. In other words, I won't be reducing his œuvre to a technique or a method.

*What's the 'spirit' of Foucault, Keilan? Sounds like a reduction to me.*

The spirit of Foucault is to show how things can be different. So say I. And so says Foucault. He sought "to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently" (Foucault, 1985/1990, p. 9). Things have not always been the way we think of them in the Academy, nor will they always be. Things need to be revolutionized. Or at least that's what his spirit says to me. Or at least that's what it says to me when I haven't taken my anti-psychotic medication.

*Keeeeeeeeeeeeee-lan. Keeeeeeeeeeeeee-lan. This is the spirit of Foucault. You are to show the Academy that things can be different. Different. Ooooooooooh. Oooooooooh.*

I answer the call. More specifically, I'm interested in experimenting with a writing style and a voice that have been excluded from the Academy. What happens if a graduate student doesn't abide by the academic code of obsequium? What results from a

naïve or stupid approach to the literature? I'm not sure, but I can tell you one thing: People don't like it. The Academy bristles. Feathers ruffle. Lines are drawn in the sand; and I, performing the pervert, cross them. Dutifully. Beautifully. A perverse aesthetic.

So is everyone on board here? I'm bouts to the start the timer. It's 9:28 PM. I'm gearing up. I'll start at 9:30 and write until 10:30. No joke. Afterward, I'll edit minimally—for spelling, grammar, flow. I'll also add in citations I'm missing during this, my closed-note writing session.

Oh wait. One more comment before I move on: Let me just clarify that when I say 'gay,' it's meant to be an inclusive term, shorthand for non-heterosexuals and those who are gender non-conforming. Forgive me for being not-so-PC, but I promise, I do love all you queerdos.

So there you have it. I start writing in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...

### **And We're Off: Gay Volleyball = Fun**

If there were one thing I could say about gay volleyball, it would be that gay volleyball is super fun. It's fun, fun, fun, fun. Gay = fun by definition so, naturally, gay volleyball = fun. Why do gays play volleyball? Because it's fun. What makes gay volleyball gay? The fact that it's fun.

Sorry for being so simplistic, but that's how I roll. Feel free to stop reading here because you now know all you need to know about gay volleyball. Should you read on, however, I hope you will enjoy yourself. Have fun. Be merry. Be gay.

If there were two things I could say about gay volleyball, I would add that gay volleyball is not only fun for me but also for people around the world. Through literature

review, web searches, and what not, I have learned how widespread a phenomenon gay volleyball is. I shall now impart this learning to you.

For starters, it might come as a surprise to you that there is gay volleyball in Central and South America. And I'm not just talking about gay leagues that meet in larger and more liberal cities like Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and so on. Naturally you'd expect well organized and publicized gay activity in those places—where there are also theaters and hairdressers galore, drawing gays by the gaggle. No. I'm talking about rural stuff. For example, I found gay volleyball in remote areas of Peru, where HIV researchers make use of weekly gay volleyball games to keep track of their male participants (who have sex with men) and teach safe-sex practices. Rates of attrition in their studies have been remarkably low, thanks to the tight-knit nature of these volleyball-playing communities (Cohen, 2006; Villacorta et al., 2007).

In an ethnographic study about street volleyball in Peru, Perez (2011) discusses ways in which gay identity is performed through distinctively gay styles of play. What makes it gay, you ask? Why, it's just what you'd expect. You've seen gays before, so you know how they act. The guys flame it up on the court. Their wrists limp. Hips stuck out. They engage in playful banter where participants campily insult one another, masterfully crafting witty retorts that draw audiences from around the community to enjoy these performances. Because the players have entered a 'joking relationship' with one another, their mini-culture dictates that they dish out insults as well as take them. Their discourse parodies and exaggerates gayness, all the while ma(r)king them gay. Playing gay, they are gay.

Moving on to Asia. Again, as expected, organized leagues are to be found in larger cities—Beijing, Seoul, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Bangkok. But surprise, surprise: There are also men who meet up with one another in rural parts of Japan (Lunsing, 2005) and Indonesia (Boellstorff, 1999); but probably not in North Korea, although Kim Jong Il's Mass Games seem kinda gay to me.

Moving on. Australia has queer leagues. No surprise there. They're pretty gay down under. However, being on an island, cut off from other gays, they have evolved their own unique homosexual species—mostly flightless varieties with belly pouches in which to rear their young.

Europe has tons of gay volleyball, including lesbians who play on the island of none other than Lesbos (Kantsa, 2002). The women's presence on the beaches transforms the space into a queer holiday, where mores are distinctly lesbian. Open affection is celebrated. Bigotry is policed.

Some legitimate scientific research (as opposed to what I'm doing here) has taken place within the gay volleyball scene in the Netherlands. One study (Elling et al., 2003) found anti-gay discrimination in mainstream volleyball clubs, mainstream being shorthand for community leagues with members presumed to be straight. Such discrimination was a motivating factor for study participants to join up with gay leagues. The study was part of a government investigation into discrimination marginalized folks in the Netherlands face. Yes, they actually care about their marginalized folks! In fact, the Dutch powers that be have called for research into gays and lesbians in sport, so as to end disparities in community funding and programming over there. France has done

something similar—the government investigating funding disparities and heterosexism (Picaud, 2008). But never mind those countries. They're going to hell.

This is boring and stupid. I'm getting bogged down trying to proclaim the renommée of gay volleyball. Is it really that important to know where all gay volleyball exists? I could never exhaust the list of locales up which gay volleyball hath sprung. On the beaches of Thailand? Check. In East Tennessee? Check. At Gay Pride Festivals worldwide? Check. As part of HIV-prevention efforts in Salt Lake City, Utah, providing social outlets for gays? Check. Every summer when Joe Bear invites all his cub and otter friends over for a backyard barbecue at his home on the fringes of suburbia? Check (see Kirkey & Forsyth, 2001). At dyke gatherings? Check (see Knight, 1997). In gay frats? Check (see Yeung et al., 2006). In radical faerie communities? Check (see the interwebs). As part of MPowerment projects? Check (see Hays, Rebchoock, & Kegeles, 2003).

*So what? Gay volleyball is everywhere.*

I think you get the point. Where there are gays, there is volleyball.

### **A Non-Foucauldian Chronicle of Gay Volleyball in the US**

Yes, yes, yes. I know that Foucault was more interested in ruptures and disjunctures than in neatly packaged chronicles or bullet-point historicizing. But A) I'm a bad Foucauldian, and B) my gut is telling me that readers, or at least some of you, will find chronology interesting. These days, we like to hear about progression through time. What happened first? We want to know. That's just how we tell stories in our society. I'm very sorry, Foucault. Please don't hate me.



The earliest evidence of gay volleyball I've been able to find in the US is from Roy Rogers State Beach in California. It's been a gay hub for several decades now. Believe it or not, some of Evelyn Hooker's gay friends even played volleyball there. This would have been as early as 1958, if I had to guess. But no one has given me grant money to travel to CA and research this question in Hooker's archives. And my emails to her archivists remain unanswered. And the people (Faderman & Timmons, 2006) who wrote the book that led me to this fact have no further information on the topic, as their informant has, unfortunately, passed away. Rest in peace, Skip Foster. Thus, I'm at a loss to find out more at this juncture. My point, though, is that volleyball has been on the gay researcher's map ever since the first gay research was performed.

Yes, Hooker's was the very first. We don't count anyone else.

Next, there is evidence that gays were playing volleyball in Laguna Beach, CA as early as 1963. I absolutely love this story, which I discovered in an LGBT timeline of Orange County, CA (available online—just Google 'LGBT timeline Orange County'). A man named Bo Frieden put together a team called the Bodettes. Isn't that great? What a campy, fun name. They played against a team called the Majorettes, named after their team captain Bob Major. Each year, as part of Memorial Day festivities, folks elected a gay 'mayor' who cut a ribbon to welcome in summer at the beach. Their activities were broadcast on a little radio station called, cleverly enough, KWER. Unfortunately, the people who currently run KWER don't have recordings from way back in 1963. So another dead end.

From there, the spread of gay volleyball is difficult to follow. The epidemiology of gay volleyball is elusive, in other words. Gays definitely gathered in the 70s to play—

still on California beaches, but also in other US cities—though the history is not well documented. Or perhaps my research skill is lacking.

*And you think you deserve a Ph.D.?*

In 1973, a man named Hans Ebensten (1994) led the gay tourism movement as he arranged for a cruise ship brimming with gays to visit a fairly undeveloped island off the coast of Panama. He called it a historical event—the fact that gays organized themselves around travel. These gays played volleyball with the Cuna Indians native to the island. At first, the gays thought they would win, and they even felt sorry for the poor Cuna; but the homos got their asses kicked and were, thus, motivated to improve their skill through practice drills. Volleyball enabled them to make friends with the Cuna. But this doesn't count as gay volleyball, does it?

Here we go: The North American Gay Volleyball Association (NAGVA) formed in the early 80s and began holding national tournaments, the first of which took place in 1983. Indeed, gay sports in general grew like wildfire during the 80s (Pitts, 1997). Young (1995) attributes this rise in gay sports to the political climate of the era, when gays responded to highly publicized (mediacized?) representations of the sickly AIDS body with counter-representations of health. Indeed, AIDS served to mobilize the gay community (Picaud, 2008). When AIDS hit, gays jumped into action, investing their energies into communities that already existed (as well as creating new types of communities) so as to preserve their precarious existence as a species. Dying in droves, they rallied together for support, finding strength in numbers.

Before I move on, I should say that the aforementioned NAGVA has a website listing some 20-odd gay volleyball leagues in the US. This list comprises only the

leagues who host NAGVA-sanctioned regional tournaments leading up to the annual national tournament. If all you knew about were NAGVA leagues, you might assume there was no other gay volleyball activity in the US. But as I have demonstrated, there are tons of little grassroots groups who get together and play without ever hosting NAGVA tournaments. For example, a few weeks ago I went to a social event that was hosted by an LGBT resource center. Wouldn't you know it? A volleyball game broke out! It was super fun. And definitely gay.

*What made it gay, Keilan?*

What? I can't hear you. The Lady Gaga blasting in my head drowns you out. Please submit your question in writing, and I'll be happy to answer it. Allow 4-6 weeks for processing and handling.

### **Bringing it to the Iron City**

In the late 70s, on hot summer days, Pittsburgh gays began congregating on a large lawn in Schenley Park. I'm told they would gather by the hundreds to sunbathe, picnic, and generally kick back, and that parking was almost impossible to find. Was it the Anita Bryant scandal, the orange juice boycott that brought them together? Probably not, says a friend of mine.

In the early 80s, AIDS hit. And a group of gays from Toronto mobilized, traveling down to Pittsburgh, like gay missionaries, to get gay softball going. We've got to do something in response to this crisis, they thought. It worked. Gay softball—an alternative to getting AIDS—took off.

Side note. When I undertook this project, I didn't want to talk about AIDS. Because I thought plenty of research had already been done around AIDS and because I

thought too much of the time gays have been associated with AIDS (for my ‘amen,’ see Halperin, 2009, especially pp. 22-23), I didn’t want my research to associate the two. But as soon as I looked into the 80s, I couldn’t help but find AIDS. It’s sad. I hate it.

Back to the story.

At the same time Toronto gay missionaries colonized Pittsburgh with their softball-playing ways, the local gays brought volleyball to Schenley Park. It was an easy activity to start. All you needed was a net, a ball, and gays. I’m told they would string the net between two trees and play for hours on end. At some point, they screwed hooks into the trees to hold the net. The hooks are still there. I love them. They serve as an artifact, a relic of a bygone era. Embedded in the trees, partially overgrown with bark, they mark this space with the memory of those who forged the way for folks like me to enjoy the ga(y)me in Pittsburgh. Sadly, most of them are gone now.

Back then, it wasn’t about fancy skill or winning. It was about acting silly, celebrating camaraderie with fellow pervert outcasts, making campy comments, drinking beer. It was about draping ivy over the head of the ‘queen’ and taking her picture as s/he posed so regally. It was about checking out potential partners, gossiping about old ones. It was about wearing short shorts and white tube socks with a stripe at the top. Going shirtless if you were a guy. It was about meeting up with people by day, out and proud, instead of by secrecy of nightfall. It was, according to my friends, the true beginnings of a Pittsburgh gay community. To this day, those who are still around from that time period get together for summer camping trips, holidays, weddings, funerals. They are more tightly knit than most families you’ll see.

In the early 90s, a group of these outdoor volleyballers thought it might be fun to start an indoor league. So they did. At Chatham College. At first they called themselves PIG volleyball, PIG being an acronym for Pittsburgh Indoor Gay. After a couple of years, their name shifted to the Steel City Volleyball League (SCVL), the moniker that persists to this day.

Over the past 20 years, the Pittsburgh gay volleyball scene has switched locations several times. They started out in the early 90s with about 40 members, grew to about 75 by the time I joined the League in 2004, and doubled to 150 by the time I left in 2010. There were five Board members when they started. Now there are fifteen. Where once they were but a group of lebigay folks eager to play volleyball and little else besides, now they're a non-profit organization, making an appreciable impact on the Pittsburgh gay community. The founding members had no idea they were such an important piece of local LGBT history.

### **Now where? I Guess Some Literature**

Only fifteen minutes left, and I haven't even mentioned literature pertaining to gay sporting communities. Maybe this means I should go light on lit.

What comes to mind when I think of gay sports literature is, of course, Cathy van Ingen (2004), one of the oftenest cited authors on the topic. She coined the term 'queer sportscapes' to describe sporty spaces which challenge the taken-for-grantedness of mainstream sporting communities. Studying the Toronto Frontrunners (TFR) ethnographically, she focused less on the geographic locales where the TFR ran and, instead, concentrated on the "landscapes of social relations" (p. 254). She found that, despite the TFR's best efforts to be inclusive and welcoming of all, there exists within

this community a pervasive sentiment of ‘healthism’ that recapitulates broader societal dynamics which make it easier for White, able-bodied, financially solvent males to fit in, and for female, transgendered, differently abled (or ‘unhealthy’), poor, and non-White bodies to fit out. Although her argument and her conclusions ostensibly pertain to method—advocating for a focus on social relations when studying ‘therapeutic landscapes’—her findings indicate that gay sports are not a utopian environment where all are equally welcome. It sucks that this is the case (that this *be* the case, if I’m to use the subjunctive). But I’m getting ahead of myself here. I will say more about the tension between being inclusive and exclusive in my chapter on Team Huddle & Cheer.

What else comes to mind regarding gay sports lit? Ooh. I know. I should talk about people who write about gays in professional sports. This group is concerned with gay athletes coming out of the closet and highlight the need for sports to be more inclusive and accepting of sexual minorities. They cling to biographies of Martina Navratilova, Billie Jean King, John Amaechi, and Greg Louganis (to name a few), as though the future of the gay movement depended on such people outing themselves. While I agree that more professional athletes should come out, that’s not my area of research. Remember, I’m circumscribing. And sorry if I’m stepping on any toes here, but let me just say that I hate when the gays buy into this idea that professional athleticism = legitimacy, thus gay athletes = legitimacy for gayness; this idea that unless we have our hero(in)es perched high on Olympic pedestals, we haven’t arrived. When are we going to stop worrying about how legitimate we are and embrace our bastardhood instead? Soon, I hope.

Next, there are folks who study gays' motivation for participating in sports. Ferez and Beukenkamp (2009), for example, find that gays are drawn to gay sports because of the affinity they feel with gay teammates. Ellings and Janssens (2009) find that gays are drawn to gay sports because they feel safer and more included there than in mainstream settings. Zamboni et al. (2008) find that intrinsic factors, such as bodily pleasures, are more salient motivators for gays to play sport than external factors, such as the glory of winning. Additionally, their study highlights well-being that obtains from participation in gay sporting communities. As much as I'm fascinated by the findings in these three studies, I'm also slightly amused by the fact that such questions about motivation are asked in the first place, as though gay motivation were aberrant or pathological and in need of research.

*Why do gays do this or that? We really need to know!*

Questions about str8s' motivation to participate in sports are nowhere to be found in the literature, queerly enough. But that's neither here nor there.

There are scholars who decry the hegemonic masculinity of sports (Pronger, 2000; Burstyn, 1999, for example). They are pretty much against sports altogether (if I could hyperbolize a tiny bit) because they instill in our youths, hence, in our societies, an attitude of win at all costs, violence, domination, homophobia. And I agree. But I also like sports, so I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Is there some way in which sports can be positive? Do we have to demonize sports just because they promote winning? I know a few feminists who routinely kick ass and take names, whether it be in writing or in their interpersonal practices. So are winning and domination really masculine values? Why does the pot have to call the kettle black?

And could I possibly ask any more rhetorical questions before you get exasperated by my not answering them?

There are people who look to gay sporting communities as an alternative, a corrective to the evil, hegemonically masculine practices of sport.<sup>1</sup> For example, there's a dude named Hamill (2003) who beat me to the punch and wrote his dissertation about gay volleyball. His ethnographic study took place in Chicago. He found that, rather than reinforcing hegemonic masculinity, his league fostered an ironic masculinity—one that celebrated different kinds of masculinity from what we think of as the norm.

Ironic masculinity. Where guys squeal, twirl around, assign feminine pronouns to one another, tell each other to swing their imaginary purses. Where winning isn't everything and participants are disgusted when the competitive spirit gets out of hand. So yes: It would appear that gay volleyball, by celebrating non-hegemonic forms of masculinity, can offer a corrective to the evil that is sport.

But Hamill doesn't know what to do with the moments that call ironic masculinity into question. He tells a story about a newish player taunting a more experienced player on court. To 'shut him up,' the experienced guy plays more aggressively on the next point, hitting impossibly hard balls at the newish player. Although Hamill sees in this story an example of players maintaining an ethos of support and nurturing within the league, I am struck by the aggressive methods—by all accounts super masculine—deployed in the interest of policing the league ethos. To promote nurturing, the experienced player resorts to domination, bordering on violence. Ironic, yes. Masculine,

---

<sup>1</sup> Pringle (2005) questions the usefulness of the concept of hegemonic masculinity. He finds it overused and in need of an overhaul. He believes the concept reinforces a binary understanding of power whereby certain groups are believed to possess power with which they dominate others. He prefers Foucault's conceptualization of power as relational, power as nowhere localized.



yes. But ironic masculinity? Hamill acknowledges that the league he researched was not a gay utopia, but he misses the opportunity to discuss ways in which taken-for-granted values such as veteranism—the idea that I’ve been here longer than you, so I carry more weight and can use it against you if need be—bump heads with a league ethos of nurturing and a zeitgeist of ironic masculinity.

I’m sure I’ll miss (and have already missed) lots of opportunities in my dissertation, as well, so I shouldn’t be too hard on Hamill.

Like Hamill’s dissertation, much of the literature on gay sporting communities draws heavily upon queer theory (see, for example, Sykes, 2006, or Eng, 2008). I take issue with authors who write in this vein. My chief complaint is that they expect gay sporting communities to espouse academic queer theory. Superimposing their queer theories onto regular old gay situations, they seem not to value the local knowledge of the gay group in question. They critique gay sporting communities for not being queer enough, in other words. And I get annoyed. What these critiques fail to recognize is that your average, run-of-the-mill gays aren’t the same as academic queers. Wellard (2006) would probably agree with me on this point. High-five to Wellard!

I want to explain what I mean by this whole queer theory vs. run-of-the-mill gays observation but am afraid I will get bogged down in this argument (and only have a few minutes left of my writing exercise). Quickly, let me just say that regular gays—contrary to what hoity-toit, ivory tower queers would have us believe as they look down their noses at us regular gays—aren’t necessarily interested in resisting power regimes all the time. They don’t continually seek to queer things up. They don’t go around trying to reverse binaries or subvert this or that. They don’t spend their time revolting. In short,

they don't do what academic queers think gays should do. Instead, they just live their lives—playing volleyball, going to work, hanging with friends, and so on. Yet the queers come along and accuse gay sportsters of not transgressing enough. So I say: Kindly keep your academic queer demands away from our gay organizations and stop trying to subject us to your queer normalizations!

I'm not sure who you are, you straw(o)man version of yourself that I'm creating for my own rhetorical advantages. All the same, you know who you are. If you're imposing your academic standards on regular gays, if you find yourself thinking that you're privy to an enlightened version of reality by virtue of having read your Judith Butlers and your Michel Foucaults more than us, then you really do need to join a gay volleyball league, taste and see that there's life outside the Academy. And it's good.

There is more I could say about literature on the topic of gay sports, but I'm running out of time (not to mention steam). I will end this section by saying that a large chunk of research revolves around the Gay Games (see Waitt, 2003, for example). Such authors have observed an atmosphere of friendly competition as opposed to winning at all costs, participants feeling a sense of camaraderie and identification with others, and displays of camp (see, for example, Ferez, 2008, or Jamain & Liotard, 2008), all of which is fine, but doesn't pertain to my interests. I'm less interested in larger gay sporting events, such as Gay Games, and more interested in groups of gays who come together on the local level to play community sports. Others have written about gays playing rugby (Price & Parker, 2003), tennis (Wellard, 2006), soccer (Caudwell, 2006), softball (Jarvis, 2006), rowing (Owen, 2006), running (van Ingen, 2004), and a few other sports. But

volleyball is underresearched. There's the aforementioned study out of the Netherlands. One dissertation. And now mine.

For those of you interested in additional scholarly literature on the topic of gay sports, you can email me or locate me by whatever means we use in the future. I make it a habit of being easily locatable (for instance, on Facebook, the phonebook of the 2010s). In my possession is a burdensome stack of articles pertaining to gay sports, as well as a not-so-up-to-APA-standard annotated bibliography I'd be happy to share with you. Just not here in my closed-note writing experiment.

### **Leaving academic literature**

In addition to the rare scholarly articles that mention gay volleyball, there are pop cultural references to the sport. Well, 'pop' might be a strong word. It would be better to say that gay volleyball pops up in literatures outside of those considered academic. But this feels boring to me.

Is it really that interesting to note that a character in some obscure episode of the show "Will and Grace" says that s/he doesn't follow "the volleyball"? How about the fact that a character in "Queer as Folk" (episode 402)—set in Pittsburgh, by the way—wishes he had HIV so he could play volleyball with his "shirtless, hunky buds"?

Would it interest you to know that the 2006 documentary *Camp out*—about LGBT teens at summer camp—shows the youngsters playing volleyball together?

Does it matter to you that South African beach volleyball star Leigh-Ann Naidoo is out as a lesbian? Or that J.P. Calderon (a pro-volleyball player of "Survivor" fame) is out as gay?

Do you care that Miller Light developed a 30-second commercial a few years ago that featured Adonis-like men playing volleyball together in a not-so-subtle gay fashion, but that the commercial never aired, for reasons unexplained (Chura, 1999)?

If I told you that one of the country's first openly gay mayors, John Laird, believes that of all his contributions to the gay community, starting a gay volleyball league in 1979 tops them all (Reti, 2003), would you just yawn in my face?

What if I mentioned websites like [outsports.com](http://outsports.com) or [realjock.com](http://realjock.com) that cater to athletic gays? Magazines like *Compete* that are devoted to gay sport? Gay magazines like *Out* and *The Advocate* that publish yearly sports issues and regularly feature stories about gays in sport?

How about the fact that in a recent episode of their show (which aired July 28, 2011), Kathie Lee Gifford and Hoda Kotb visited Rehomo Beach (ha!) and played volleyball with the infamous drag queens there in Delaware? Any interest in knowing more? I doubt it.

Do you care that filmmaker Jérôme Caza covered lesbian volleyball in a short documentary for French TV? That David Thorpe made a short docucomedy about his time with a gay volleyball league in New York City? That Yongyoot Thongkongtoon directed the second-highest grossing Thai film of all time in 2000 and that the subject was ladybois who played volleyball? Would the 2003 sequel interest you more?

*Nah. We're over this. Let's move on.*

Okay. But I will come back to Thorpe and Thongkongtoon later on. In the meantime, please repeat the name Yongyoot Thongkongtoon aloud ten times, as quickly as possible, until you can say it without tripping up.

## **What to expect from this dissertation**

Time is ticking. And I haven't even given you a lay of the land. You need to know what's coming in this dissertation.

In the next chapter, I talk about autoethnography, which is the crazy method I'm using to write this dissertation. Don't worry, it's okay that my writing is crazy. That's what I'm going for. I discuss the advantages and limitations of autoethnography and justify my use of said method. I also attempt to provide you with evaluative criteria for this method even as I push its limits. Arguably, my discussion of autoethnography is the most valuable contribution I make in this dissertation to the Academy. Thus, you'd better listen up so you can be in the know with regard to the state of the art ☺

In the next several chapters after the one on autoethnography, I take you through a year in the life of the SCVL. Pretend that you enter the League. What can you expect? I'd like to provide a glimpse of the practices to which you'll be subjectified (ha!). Perhaps I'll do a piss-poor job, but drawing upon Foucault, I will try and "saisir l'instance matérielle de l'assujettissement en tant que constitution des sujets" (Foucault, 1977/2001, p. 179); that is to say, I will try and catch sight of concrete moments when subjects are constituted. Or something like that.

First of all, you'll be subjectified to Skills Clinics, where not only will you learn techniques necessary to play the game of volleyball, but you will also be rated upon your skills. You will be sized up, taxonomized. Through the Skills Clinics, your entrée into the League, you will be introduced to the League ethos of hospitality and care. On the flip side, you will feel your status as newbie most strongly during Skills Clinics, but that's not a bad thing, necessarily.

After a few weeks of Skills Clinics, you will be placed on a team. How are you placed on a team? Well, it's kind of a secretive process. Through my research, however, I have unlocked this mystery and will reveal it to you in my chapter on Team Selection. The Board, the ruling body of the League, aims to create fair and balanced teams, not wishing for anyone to dominate. They call upon the gay gods in a divination ritual, cleromancy, to select teams. The gay gods insist upon equality for all.

Once you're on a team, you meet your teammates and select a team name, a process I discuss in Chapter Five. You will enjoy selecting a team name because you get to be scandalous and celebrate your perversity. The process of selecting team names will lend credence to my pet theory that gays are slippery when it comes to issues of identity, the theory I'm performing as I write. Just when you think you've pegged us, identified us as this or that, we find a way of resisting your nomenclature by parading about with new and creative identities, celebrating a carnival of personae.

In my chapter on Team Huddle & Cheer, you will get a taste of the kinds of fun you can have with your teammates each week. You will learn proper and improper ways of cheering. You will bond with your teammates through your cheer, which is not intended to strike fear in your opponents but foster camaraderie amongst your fellow teammates and, as with other League practices, bring campy levity to weekly play.

The next chapter pertains to Team Mentors. If you're new to the League, you will certainly not get to be a mentor. This Board-designated role is reserved for people who have been with the League for several seasons and know the ropes. During my year of research (2008-09), the Board asked me to serve as mentor for my team. I took the role very seriously. Striving to be a top-notch mentor, I disciplined myself in accordance with

League ethics in a way that brought the ethics to life. I performed the ethics. As such, we get to see

the procedures, as they exist undoubtedly in every civilization, that are proposed or prescribed to individuals [in the SCVL] to fix their identity, maintain it, or transform it in the function of a certain number of ends and owing to relations of mastery of the self over the self or of knowledge [*connaissance*] of the self by the self. (Foucault, 1981/2001, p. 1032, my shitty translation)

What did being a mentor do for my identity development as a gay man? And how was my mentorship used in the service of the League? These are great questions. I try and answer them in that chapter.

Following my chapter on Team Mentors, I quickly gloss six additional League practices that were important in my fieldnotes; but they weren't important enough to merit a chapter each, and besides I was getting tired of my dissertation when I wrote them, so I have lumped them all together in a rapid chapter, a metastasis. I quickly gloss these practices so that you don't get bored.

After reading the aforementioned chapters, you will have a decent grasp of League activities. You'll get an idea of some of the practices to which I was subjectificated (ha!), practices that I strove to master in order to become the best SCVL member I could be. Keilan, the exemplar.

In the next chapter, then, the chapter called Iron City Ladies, I argue that, because I was familiar with League practices, I was able to work on behalf of the League to accomplish some pretty cool things. In February of 2008, the Board announced that it wished to expand the League. They asked for help from lay members. So I helped. I devoted myself entirely to the League and its expansion project. In so doing, I became gay volleyball in a way that most members never do, nor even want to do. My

dissertation became something wilder than I ever envisioned: a hybrid participant-action study, hovering around what Stufflebeam (2001) might call public relations, pseudoevaluation, constructivist, and democratic approaches to program evaluation. I won't tell you here the results of my (and fellow activists') activities—this cliffhanger will foster a desire in you to read on—but I will say that I'm proud to have been part.

I end my dissertation proper with a Conclusions chapter that looks at the many, many shortcomings of my research. I mean, come on. I didn't even do interviews. My fieldnotes are a total mess. My writing leaves much to be desired. And yet, I stand by it. You may hate it, and that's okay. I contend, by virtue of my authority as queerbait academe and gay volleyball historian, extraordinaire, that gay volleyball has the potential to save lives and that funding agencies would be well-advised to grant research projects that implement gay volleyball programming in communities where gays are at risk or are underserved medically. Even though I have absolutely no quantitative measure to support my argument, it is 100% true.

Finally, I have included an Appendix in which I step out of character and try to be serious, for once, in order to distill and present the substance of my argument about gay identity development through gay volleyball. I hope you will find the prose in my Appendix straightforward and intelligible.

So there you have it. Not your standard dissertation by any stretch of the imagination. But please enjoy.

And looky there. I've exceeded my one-hour time limit by more than 45 minutes. Be warned: This is not the last time my dissertation will bend the rules.



## Chapter 2: On (Auto)ethnography

### A Critique of (Auto)ethnography: Procatalepsizing You Up

Anthropology, or at least interpretive anthropology, is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other. (Geertz, 1973, p. 29)

It is rare for scientists to abandon the paradigm in which they were trained and adopt a new one, so the history of scientific progress is that younger, fresher scientists explore the possibilities of a new paradigm, whereas the established scientists defend the old one. (Packer, 2011, p. 30)

I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same. (Foucault, 1969/1982, p. 17)

I'm feeling defensive of autoethnography as a method. Hell, autoethnography is not even recognized by my version of Microsoft Word as a legitimate word! But hey, I take the red squiggle underneath to mean I'm onto something ☺

Autoethnography is illegitimate, just like me, the pervert, incapable of telling us much truth about the SCVL, my gay volleyball league. After all, herein we only have one hero(ine)'s account, and that from a weirdo, someone who wasn't really an insider. Yes, I was an insider, but a different kind of insider. A researcher, I was concerned with oblique aspects of the League, things regular members couldn't give two shits about. I looked at identity development, well-being, empowerment. Regular old League members aren't concerned with such questions. These were outside questions. Imposed, colonial questions. I was trying to get the League to say something it didn't say, speak a truth it doesn't speak.

Chaque société a son régime de vérité, sa <<politique générale>> de la vérité: c'est-à-dire les types de discours qu'elle accueille et fait fonctionner comme vrais; les mécanismes et les instances qui permettent de distinguer les énoncés vrais ou faux, la manière dont on sanctionne les uns et les autres; les techniques et les procédures qui sont valorisées pour l'obtention de la vérité; le statut de ceux qui ont la charge de dire ce qui fonctionne comme vrai. (Foucault, 1976/2001, p. 112)

Sorry, I'm not going to translate. I trust that your French is good enough to get the point, which is that the means of truth making in the SCVL differ—often widely—from those of the Academy, particularly the Big Queers. And sorry if I'm setting up a straw(o)man, but I feel that all too frequently the Academy assumes its ways of knowing are the right ones, the most enlightened ones. I'm guilty of doing it. You know, we think that we're possessed of a higher truth, that our education makes our views and opinions right; whereas we roll our eyes at the opinions and views of those 'plebes.' How horrible is that? What would it be like for us to get off our high horse and respect uneducated views? What would happen if we truly looked to uneducated people to teach us something about the world instead of thinking we need to educate them?

I struggled not to impose academic ways of knowing onto the SCVL or judge League knowledge by academic standards. Unfortunately, this stance results at times in an Us vs. Them polemic, Us being the regular old gays and Them being academic queers. The voice that I adopt as I write this dissertation is aligned with the Us. I am a gay, preaching at the queers.

Being an SCVL insider, I had little interest in being an outsider. I cared little to ask academic questions about my experience. Why would I want to ask academic questions? So that the Academy could stroke its collective chin and decide whether or not my interpretations about my experience pass the muster?

Actually, even the Academy doesn't care about my questions. In fact, because this autoethnography is merely a dissertation—a glorified student paper—no one cares what it says. It's just going on a shelf amongst thousands of other ho-hum dissertatia.

Autoethnography. It sucks as a method. There's no structure to it. It would have been so much easier if I had chosen a real method (and, for that matter, a subject of actual interest to the field of psychology) than to try and construct a method out of nothing but my madness, my rantings for page after page. My stories. My arbitrarily selected League practices that I discuss and pretend to exegete. My occasional lapses out of reality and into delirium. And this I call autoethnography? Why couldn't I be a good boy and just write a standard introduction, methods section, findings, discussion, and whatever else normal grad students include in their dissertation format to actually get their Ph.D. instead of forestalling the process for years as I have now done?

In listing all the problems I see with autoethnography, I'm trying to preempt the problems you see with said method. I'm procatalepsizing you up. I'm cutting your argument off at the pass, putting words in your mouth, only to riff on them. You think autoethnography is too autocentric, self-indulgent.

You're right.

You think autoethnography, because it relies solely upon my experience, is incapable of generalizing. There's no way to test my hypotheses. They're unprovable, undisprovable.

Yeppers.

You think that the method itself is what leads to truth. You think, in other words, that if a researcher sticks neurotically to a tried-and-true method, never veering from meticulousness, then s/he's bound to arrive at truth. You think that if my methods are madness, then so will my findings be.

And that's where you'd be wrong. For you see, what I aim to show through the use of autoethnography is that no method is holy (Clifford, 1983). There's nothing sacred, for example, about the way I write my fieldnotes. There's nothing magical about my participant-observational stance. The key to finding truth is not thorough training in self-reflection, interviewing skill, or knowledge of the anthropological canon.

There is no key to finding truth. I'm simply making up truth as I write.

Well, that might be stating the point too strongly, too nihilistically. I have to believe in some kind of truth, otherwise I'd have killed myself long ago. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I hold my truths loosely. If I say one thing and contradict myself later, it might be because I never believed the first truth fully and am trying to rework it or that I intended it ironically. Or maybe I'm just trying to get your goat.

The point of autoethnography is to evoke. To provoke. To stir up emotion. To appeal to readers' pathos. To call into question other kinds of scientific writing. To challenge the style vs. substance binary.

*Okay, Keilan. Come down off your soapbox. Tell us something of import.*

### **Noting the Field: Fieldnoting**

While making his [sic] observations the field-worker must constantly construct: he [sic] must place isolated data in relation to one another and study the manner in which they integrate. (Malinowski, 1965, p. 317)

Let me talk for a minute about fieldnotes. Again, I don't believe there's a proper or improper way to write them. As long as I make an effort to be honest, truthful, there will surely be something usable, something analyzable in them.

Fieldnotes. They're mine. They're not available for just anyone to come along and read. Because they're about me, the human subject of this research—and I haven't

given you my informed consent—you don't have the right to read them. Unless you're the Law and have a warrant. Or over my dead body.

Fieldnotes. Just a journal really. Just my scribblings, my thoughts. My *hupomnemata* (see Foucault, 1983/2001). My experiments with writing. Esquisses, rough drafts, maquettes. My laboratory where I turn out a mean phrase. My brain storm. My rhetorical studies. My scrap paper. My scansion charts and bad art. My poetaster's chicken scratches—spondee, dactyl, trochee—I wad them up and toss them on the floor next to the heater.

Iamb: a fire hazard.

I was told by my director to check out what others have said about fieldnotes. So I did, like a good little graduate student. And what I found was simply hilarious. One essay that comes to mind (Sanjek, 1990) talks about an ethnographer who, in the midst of looking at artifacts, had to run to the bathroom to jot down notes. It was like he had a bad case of diarrhea. He ingested information from natives, then let all the information build up, build up, build up, until finally he couldn't take it any more and had to rush to the bathroom where an explosion occurred onto his steno pad.

Gross! And you thought I was the one with coprolalia!

Even Hamill (2003), the other dude who wrote a dissertation on gay volleyball, found himself rushing off to the bathroom or his car to write notes.

I don't know. Call me a bad researcher, but there was never a point in my study of the SCVL that I felt the urgent need to leave a volleyball situation to run off and write about it. That would have been A) rude and B) overkill. There was one time, however, I

attempted to write fieldnotes *in situ*. Here's what I wrote about that experience (ex post facto) in my fieldnotes, January 25, 2008:

The faux grass area of the gym was empty, so I went over there and wanted to write fieldnotes, but I couldn't think of anything to write, and besides I felt weird noting down stuff that people were doing. It reminded me of being at the San Diego Zoo at the panda exhibit where I had to wait in a long line to see the pandas, and when I finally got up close enough to see them, there was a zoo employee there with a notebook jotting something down as she observed the pandas in captivity. I asked her what she was writing. She told me she was researching. I knew that. So I rephrased my question. She told me something to the effect, "You wouldn't understand." All I wanted to know was what behaviors she was noting. Why couldn't she tell me that? Anyway, the point is that I felt like her today. I was observing behavior—even through a cage of sorts: the net wall that separates the faux grass field from the vball courts. And if someone had come up and asked what kinds of things I was noting, I wouldn't have known what to say. I didn't know what to write. So I decided not to write anything.

I resolved that day that if there were important things to remember, I would simply remember them and write them down later. The epiphanies (Ellis et al., 2011); the things that stood out to me; the things I felt were important lingered (and still do) in my headnotes (see Sanjek, 1990).

If you must know, I made sure to write at least one entry hebdomadally throughout two seasons with the SCVL, from September of 2008 until May of 2009. There were times I wrote more than one entry per week. And I'm pretty sure that I didn't skip any weeks, but who knows? I might have. Although I was disciplined about the quantity of entries I wrote, I was all over the place when it came to quality or content.

But did it really matter what went into my fieldnotes? Is there a right or wrong way to write fieldnotes?

*Anesis.* Even though I'm fighting tooth and nail to defend my position that there are no hard-and-fast rules about how to write fieldnotes, I must recant and tell you that I wish I had written better fieldnotes.

*Come on, Keilan. You can't recant! Anesis is a rhetorical vice—one of the worst infractions imaginable! Stick with an idea. Follow it through. Be cocksure like a good academe!*

If a man [sic] sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. (Malinowski, 1961, p. 9)

Thank you, Malinowski. I want to explore this back pedal: What would have made my fieldnotes better?

First of all, I wish I had told more stories. When I sort through my 300+ pages of fieldnotes and journal entries, I find a bunch of crap that could have been left out. Yes, there were fun writing experiments, but they ended up being harebrained theorizing, disjointed musings more than anything. I could kick my 2008-09 self for not making more of an effort to tell stories. That's not to say that I didn't tell stories. On the contrary, I told plenty of them. But I wish I had focused on the stories themselves instead of all the peripheral stuff that went in.

So there you have it. If I could say one thing about fieldnotes, I would say that they need to include stories. But I do like a challenge. So part of the challenge for me in writing this dissertation has been to sort through the fieldnotes and determine how to use them, how to analyze them, in spite of their being a mess. I can't go back to 2008-09 and rewrite my fieldnotes. What's written is written. My task, then, has been to spin gold out of word vomit.

What else would have made my fieldnotes better?

They would have been better if I had circumscribed my research question ahead of time. That way, I could have written focused stories related to my thesis instead of

just writing whatever the heck I felt like writing. Again, my fieldnotes are a huge mess, and little of it pertains to the how of gay identity development and well-being within the League, questions I promised to answer in this dissertation when I wrote my proposal (prospectus) back in 2007.

Actually, the problem with my entire dissertation (and not just my fieldnotes) has been uncircumscribed questions. What am I trying to say in this dissertation? What's the subject?

It has never been clear to me ☺

But one thing I do know: I take autoethnography to be a catalyst for change within the Academy. Through autoethnography, I seek to spark controversy. The words themselves (i.e., the content) are of little import most of the time. I'm forcing you the reader into a polemical situation. I set off practices that the Academy holds dear. Like Foucault, I wish to demonstrate that there are other ways for this old-wineskin Academy to skin a cat, dummy.

HA!

More specifically, I am trying to challenge standard academic writing styles. Because academic prose is presumed to be transparent, voiceless, invisible, we overlook the fact that academic prose is a voice in and of itself. Boring, stodgy, 'sans voice' writing has come to be associated with truth. If we write in a non-flowery, dry, clausy, nouny style, we give off the impression that we're smart, that we're reporting 'just the facts,' when in actuality, we're relying just as much on rhetorical style for our substance as I am when I write in my cockamamie fashion. It's just that mine's more obvious because it's so different. But I'm hoping that in being different, in writing differently, I



will draw your attention to the dividing line between my writing style and yours (assuming you're the straw(o)man academe interlocutor) and invite you to reconsider the taken-for-grantedness of your truth-making practices, rife with rhetorical strategies you'd like to believe are not rhetorical at all.

Why is anesis so bad? Why is citation such a staple of scientific writing? Why do colloquialisms have no place? Why does a humorous or hysterical tone get dismissed? Why must my argument progress in a linear fashion? Why can't I leave this whole dissertation under erasure, turn in a rough draft, an esquisse? Why am I troubled by this series of rhetorical questions?

I leave you with these questions and provide just a hint of an answer: I write this way so as to perform the kind of subject I have become. With one foot in the Academy, one foot in the world of gay volleyball, and other feet elsewhere entirely, I am a multitude of identities. I embrace and resist them all.

Not sure why I've taken it upon myself to resist academic writing styles as much as I have. Not sure that all the self-reflection in the world would ever lead me to the 'right' answer as to why. All I know is that it's more fun to write this way. I hope it's more fun to read, too.

### **Abrupt Change of Topic: Seriously, No Interviews?**

For this project, I opted not to do interviews and feel I should comment upon this decision. Frankly, this was a stupid decision. In almost all the literature I've read about ethnography, auto- or otherwise, the researcher has used interviews. They're a staple of ethnography. So who am I, this whipper-snapper of a neophyte, to come in and change the discipline, the state of the art?

I'm but a lowly grad student. So you have no reason to take anything I say seriously. This paper will come and go without much impact on the field of anthropology and less-than-negligible influence on psychology.

There are several reasons I opted not to do interviews. I begin with this excerpt from fieldnotes, dated January 4, 2009:

I don't like approaching people and asking for an interview. So I always lose the nerve or change my mind. It feels imposing to ask people for interviews. It just doesn't feel appropriate. It feels like I'm capitalizing on people or invading their privacy. I don't know quite what it is, but I don't like doing it. I'd much rather just write fieldnotes, read emails, read newsletters, read websites, etc. Interviews just aren't for me.

Why don't I like approaching people for interviews? It has something to do with the fact that interviews benefit me mostly. They benefit my research only. I'm not compensating interviewees for their time. What's in it for them? Nothing really.

Why don't I like approaching people for interviews? It has something to do with the fact that I don't want to out myself too much as a researcher. I mean, sure, lots of people, including the Board, know I'm doing research, and people seem to be totally cool with it. But when I ask people for an interview, I immediately switch roles—from friend and fellow vballer to academician and analyst. I don't like switching to that role. I prefer to stay in the gay vball mode.

Why don't I like approaching people for interviews? I think it has something to do with the fact that people's faces change whenever I tell them I'm doing research and ask would they consider granting me an interview. The conversation can be going swimmingly, but when I ask for an interview, something changes immediately. I can't put my finger on it. The face changes. A shift occurs. The person may say, "Sure," but the face says something else. I interpret the face shift as discomfort. The person becomes uncomfortable with Keilan the academician/analyst. My gaze makes them uncomfortable. My gaze, the academic gaze, has somehow penetrated the heterotopic space, the safe gay space in which we were just now getting on swimmingly. The perverse, voyeuristic academic gaze that renders the gazee uncomfortable. I don't like it!!

I'm an insider in the League. When I step into researcher mode, I extricate myself. And I don't like it. I bring an outsider's gaze into an otherwise safe space, a space of all insiders. I don't like it.

So, tonight [at the SCVL], I didn't get a single email address. I didn't schedule a single interview. And I'm okay with that. Well, I'm trying to be okay with that.

There you have it. I felt that asking people for interviews violated the heterotopia that is the SCVL. Who invited this researcher? Can't we gays do anything around here without know-it-alls sticking their nose (knows) into our business? It's not like we're a bunch of pandas at the zoo. Keep your questions, your recording devices, your checkboxes, your informed consent, your analysis off our bodies!

Confession time. I actually did one interview. The IRB gave me permission to do interviews and to record them. The interviewee signed informed consent, and I audiotaped our conversation. It was horrible. I felt so fake. I transcribed it, but afterward my computer crashed, losing the transcription. I still had the audiorecording but didn't want to transcribe it again. So I deleted it.

Grounded (ground-up) theory supported me in my decision to delete the interview. For you see, grounded theory states that you can stop doing interviews once you've reached a saturation point with regard to data. In other words, once your interviews are starting to yield repetitive data, if you're not learning anything new from them, you can stop doing them. Well, my very first interview consisted solely of information I already knew. My first interview reached this mystical saturation point. So I felt justified in deleting it from my data set.

HA!

No, it's true. I honestly felt my interview yielded nothing new, nothing I hadn't already thought about. I suppose that, being an insider, I already held similar ideas about the League as my informants. I imagined that 100 more interviews would only achieve the same result. So why bother?

I'm horrible at arguing my points. My logic is never cogent.

Well, if you're not sold, then perhaps this final bill of goods will do the trick: I decided not to do interviews because I wanted to be like Foucault. As far as I know, Foucault never interviewed the Greco-Romans he was so fond of writing about. Rather, he relied on written documents, archives, *énoncé*. Could I not do the same?

I thought I could.

I relied upon fieldnotes, my written documents, the indigenous texts I produced (rather than collected) from the League (see Clifford, 1990). I relied upon hunches, feelings, affects. I relied upon emails from League members, casual conversations over beers or at parties. I examined "records kept by a community for its own use, unprovoked by outside forces, [which] will necessarily differ from texts produced in reaction to an external power" (Buzard, 2003, p. 68). I worked on behalf of the League to gather up these records and documents to keep in a safe place.

Did I do good?

You'll have to be the judge of that.

*Tell me how I'm supposed to judge your work, Keilan.*

Okay then. In what follows, I distill into a few paragraphs several authors' ideas about autoethnography and how it is to be evaluated.

### **Defining (Auto)ethnography: Its Essence, Sine Qua Non**

Autoethnography evokes and provokes. It perverts and controverts. It performs (Clough, 2000). It is heretical, persuasive, moving, relational, dialogical (Spry, 2001). It has an effect on the reader (Packer, 2011).

Autoethnography excites and incites. It mustn't be boring (Yawn, 2011).

Autethnography tells stories (Obviously, 1956).

Autoethnography challenges the style vs. substance binary. It is an opaque, as opposed to a transparent, style (see Lanham, 2003). It straddles the fence between poetry and prose, science and art (Amen-Brother, 2008).

Autoethnography is voiced. It empowers my voice (Kutz, 1990). Thus, it tends to attract minorities, hoping their voices will be empowered within the Academy (Richardson, 2000).

Autoethnographers are insecure and spend too much time defending autoethnography as a method (see, for example, Rambo, 2007, not to be confused with Ramble, 2008).

Autoethnography distrusts method (Bo Peep, 1880).

Autoethnography calls for the reader to think differently about given practices of the Academy (Faggotmunch, 1980).

Autoethnography forces the hand of readers tempted to critique the writing *ad hominem*. Oh, you're judging me? Let's roll with that. I'll give you plenty to judge me for. At the same time, though, I'll dodge your critiques by saying, "This isn't me!" And as I hold up a mirror, you'll judge yourself. By calling your attention to the ways in which you judge me (or I imagine you judge me), I hope to challenge some of the practices of the Academy that we all hold so dear without ever questioning why they're so dear to us. Why, for example, should writing be boring and bland, sans voice? Why should authors speak just the provable facts and keep their opinions to themselves? Why should my reference section be a mile long?

*There you go again with the rhetorical questions.*

Autoethnography, or at least my version thereof, lets itself ask rhetorical questions. It lets itself repeat, ruminate on the same rhetorical questions it's already asked. It wonders whether the question is the answer more than the answer is.

Autoethnography is short on interpretation. That's more of the reader's job. It doesn't spoon-feed you any truths.

Autoethnography, according to Richardson (2000), must contribute to our understanding of social life, must have aesthetic merit, must be reflexive, must have an impact, and must express a reality. She goes on to say that it's critical, that it experiments. It undermines hierarchies and power. It reveals institutional secrets. And it is not afraid to go wherever the writing takes the author.

Yipee!

According to Sparkes and Smith (2009), you cannot determine in advance how you will evaluate autoethnography. So why am I bothering to tell you how to evaluate it? Furthermore, in order for you to evaluate autoethnography, you need to become intimately familiar with the piece of writing, yea, become a connoisseur of writing itself. But because this is merely a dissertation, you'll probably just skim it. You'll not read it over and over again, the way you would a canonical text.

Are you in love with rhetoric, philology, poetry? Will you even notice the way I play with words, pervert them?

Above all, autoethnography is well written (Spry, 2001).

I suspect you will hate it, thanks to this warning from Holt (2003): "Researchers would be well advised to be persistent in their autoethnographic intentions, and be

prepared to face rejection and critiques of their chosen genre. Resilience and conviction are required to pursue this methodology” (p. 26).

I’m prepared. I will be persistent. I hope you enjoy.

## **Chapter 3: Skills Clinics**

### **Skills Clinics: My Experiences Therein**

Article 3.1 of the SCVL bylaws states that the League exists in order to

[p]rovide the GLBT community with an educational opportunity to participate in, learn, and develop skills in the organized sport of recreational and competitive volleyball while maintaining the integrity of the game.

One way the League provides such an educational opportunity is through Skills Clinics, instructing League members in the rules, terminology, skills, and strategies of volleyball.

At the same time, I argue, the Skills Clinics, insidiously enough, instruct(ure) members in how they are to act within the League.

Flashback alert!

It's September of 2004. I've just moved to Pittsburgh to begin graduate school at Duquesne University. Two things I know about myself at this point: 1) I've always been gay, and 2) I've always loved volleyball, have played it here and there, never anything too serious or formal—mostly at family reunions, summer camp, college intramurals, or pick-up games at the beach. I decide to join the SCVL because I heart volleyball and figure I need to make friends with gays since I'll be living in this city for awhile.

I arrive at the YMCA in downtown Pittsburgh on a Saturday morning, take the stairs as a warm up to the fifth floor, where the volleyball courts are brimming with super skilled people already playing.

Can't wait to play with them.

Instead of getting to play, however, I'm greeted by Board members and corralled onto a court with fellow newbies for a Skills Clinic.

Skills Clinic? I don't want a stupid Skills Clinic. Just let me freakin' play!



Right away, my position as newbie becomes apparent. I'm forced to attend baby Skills Clinics. A Board member instructs us in how to do this or that volleyball skill properly. Distracted, I keep turning my head to the other court, where returning members have organized an impromptu game. They're SO GOOD!! OMG. Look at them flying through the air and hitting the ball—precision form and lightning speed! Everything is so fluid, controlled, organized. Nothing like the frantic, do-whatever-it-takes-to-get-the-ball-over-the-net style of play I've always known. I can't WAIT to PLAY!!

But no. Skills Clinics.

I feel held back, prevented from playing. I'm chomping at the bit. But newbies must attend Skills Clinics. So I submit, albeit begrudgingly, to this rite of passage.

That was my first experience of Skills Clinics and the SCVL.

As you probably guessed, I eventually got to join the returning members for matches. No worries. I'll cover those stories later on. But my first impression of the League was that their stupid Skills Clinics got in my way, delayed my play. They were a rite of passage, a necessary evil. They set me apart as newbie. No matter how eager I was to get started with actual games, however, I obsequed the Board and let myself be corralled along with other newbies onto the Skills Clinic court. The Board held sway over me.

During my six-year stint with the League, I saw subtle changes in the Skills Clinics practically every season. The most notable change occurred in the fall 2008 season when the SCVL was experiencing enormous growth. Because we were bursting at the seams, the Board split the League in two: a recreational and a competitive division. Naturally, players with more advanced skills were placed in the competitive division.

To determine which players went where, the Board began using Skills Clinics as an assessment device, a taxonomizer. As always, new players had to participate in Skills Clinics, but now their skills were formally rated by Board members. Returning members were pre-assigned a rating by the Board, thus, as always, they did not need to take part in Skills Clinics.

Imagine you're new to the League. During the Clinics the first two or three weeks of the season, you perform lots of drills, under the watchful eye of League representatives. Does your pass make it to the proper target eight out of ten times? Do you most often use proper footwork to approach a spike? Do you consistently set balls at the desired height? Do you even know what these terms mean? If not, you'll be rated low as a result of your participation in the Skills Clinic (qua taxonomizer) and put into the recreational division.

Returning members who are unhappy with their rating can contest it by undergoing assessment, participating in the Skills Clinics. I was happy with my pre-assigned rating in the fall of 2008. An in-betweenner, I was eligible to play in both the recreational and competitive divisions, which meant more court time for me! Still, though, I participated in the fall 2008 Skills Clinics. Yes, believe it or not, I went voluntarily. Although returning members were not required to attend, the Board "strongly encourage[s] returning players who are not at an advanced level to participate in the clinics" (email from the Board to the SCVL, September 3, 2008). Having never considered myself an advanced player, and now having an in-between rating as verification, I attended the Clinics in hopes of improving my game.

The Clinics were a source of gossip within the League. They were also the subject of frequent rant sessions in my fieldnotes. For example, I bitched about them in a September 8, 2008 fieldnote:

[A Board member] quickly talked about the difference between “backyard volleyball,” where people just hit the ball however they want, and the SCVL, which strives to play by the rules and achieve three hits: a pass, a set, and a spike. S/he told us that the Skills Clinics were going to teach us each of these basic skills. I was antsy. I wanted to begin. From my pedagogical standpoint, I think it’s best to let people DO instead of talking so much about doing. Thankfully s/he ended before I got too impatient. [...] Overall, I thought the Skills Clinics today weren’t thorough enough and that the instructors didn’t take skill level into account when designing them.

The drills that day were too difficult for the beginner players. They weren’t advanced enough for the returning players. I saw lots of confusion and chaos. I was frustrated. The Board—responsible for developing my skills, working my body and coordination so that I might improve my game—was letting me down!

In November of that season, I was given an opportunity to voice my complaint when the Board surveyed our membership. On the survey(monkey), there was an item requesting feedback about Skills Clinics. We see, then, that Skills Clinics were not only the subject of gossip and my fieldnote rants, but also the subject of concern for the SCVL leadership. On the survey, I complained and offered suggestions for improvement, like a good little citizen.

On December 16, 2008, the survey results were conveyed to the League in an email from the Board: “You like and appreciate that we offer skills clinics, and many of you would like to see more.” Huh-WHAT?? I guess most people weren’t as annoyed by the Clinics as I was. My voice must have been heard, however, for the email also said that some people “want more advanced instruction”; so in the spring of 2009, the Board

changed the Skills Clinics such that as the season progressed, they covered more advanced topics.

Ironically, I never attended those.

### **What We Can Learn From Skills Clinics?**

So. What have we learned about the League from this examination of its perennial Skills Clinics? And the bigger question, What can we learn about being gay?

To be honest, as I participated in Skills Clinics, I wasn't thinking about how they impacted my gay identity. Such thoughts rarely crossed my mind. Today, as I write, I'm trying not to overlook "the way the social world is understood and interpreted by the actors within [, and I'm trying not to] end up imposing the scientists' abstract constructs" onto my experience (Packer, 2011, p. 155). In other words, I'm trying to remain true to my original experience instead of coating it with an academic lacquer; I'm avoiding *lacquered-emic* knowledge. Hehehe.

A League insider, I was mostly concerned with how my skills were or were not improving. I was focused on the drill du jour. Thus, an 'experience near' reading of the Skills Clinics would be limited to a discussion of my skills themselves or how annoyed I felt during Clinics. Now that it's today, however, and I'm wearing my researcher hat, writing for the Academy, I must translate my original experience (*emic* knowledge) into language that is foreign to the SCVL (*etic* knowledge). My local knowledge of the League will, in what follows, be overwritten by my academic self as I seek to make the League speak something true about gay. I take off my SCVL members-only hat and squeeze my experience through an academic sieve to see what it drips out, secretes.

The Skills Clinic served as my entrée into the League. It was there that I was first introduced to the League mores, ethos, zeitgeist. Much information was imparted to me right away. First of all, I learned that there exists within the League a hierarchy. There are Board members. There are returning members. There are newbies. In that order. Those in the know with regard to volleyball skill are not subjected to Skills Clinics. Newbies are. With increased skill and volleyball knowledge come advancements in the social hierarchy.

Second, I notice that the SCVL set itself apart from other institutions. We were not, for example, ‘backyard volleyball,’ heaven forbid. We were different, characterized by an appreciation of proper form, technique, and strategy—our sporting aesthetic—instilled in us through the Skills Clinics. We maintained the integrity of the game. We followed the rules. We played properly.

Third, even though I didn’t think of the Skills Clinics as super fun, I could tell that the League was all about having fun. Right? That’s the main point of my dissertation. Here it returns as a leitmotif.

Knowing that it’s no fun to play volleyball if you suck at it, the Board holds Skills Clinics (has been doing so for years) to ensure that people better their game. There’s something inherently pleasurable about ameliorating one’s skills. A sense of accomplishment. An I did it. Look how much I’m improving. There’s an intrinsic payoff to learning new skills. It’s a reward-related behavior, a body high. In short, it’s fun. The Skills Clinics, although an annoyance for me, were ultimately intended to help me have fun. If I weren’t such a weirdo, I’m sure I would have enjoyed them more.

During my first Skills Clinic I noticed, fourthly, a spirit of inclusion, hospitality, even toward the newbies. Come one, come all, you're welcome to join! Here, put on this nametag. I'm so and so. Where are you from? Oh, that's cool. You're studying psychology at Duquesne? I have a cousin who went there. Chit, chit, chit. Chat, chat, chat. The hi-how-are-yous of gay volleyball.

Skills Clinics and inclusion. If you come to the League and don't know how to play volleyball, if you don't know volleyball terminology, you'll feel left out. To foster inclusion, then, the League provides Skills Clinics where people learn the basics. Even if you have never touched a volleyball, please join us, says a Board member in a promotional video. We will make sure that you're brought up to speed. Sure, you're a beginner now; but volleyball is one of those sports where the more you play, the better you get, says a friend of mine. There's a place for you here. You belong.

Fifth, as I participated in my first Skills Clinic, I picked up on a prevailing attitude of support and encouragement. We were a court full of newbies, our play characterized by mishits, missteps, and mistakes of every kind. But no matter. The instructors weren't there to judge or laugh at us. They patiently taught us and provided constructive feedback. Perhaps because of my dearth of prior exposure to real live gays I was on the lookout for the stereotypical bitchy queens. I was ever vigilant for eye-rolling and sassy comments. But what? No huffing and puffing? No feet tapping impatiently? Whoa. They're genuinely supportive and encouraging. I mess up and am instructed to 'shake it off' or told 'that's okay.' This feels good.

Finally, I was struck during my first Skills Clinic by how serious people were about the sport of volleyball itself. So much was volleyball the reason for our convening

that all other reasons were secondary or tertiary. In other words, we were there to play volleyball, not to be gay. Yes we were (mostly) all gay, but mostly we just wanted to play volleyball. Gay was a non-issue. It was practically invisible, in the background.

As someone who was relatively new to the world of gay, however, I was hyper aware that the SCVL was a gay space. During my first Skills Clinics, I never ceased to be cognizant—and dare I say a bit unnerved?—that I was surrounded by other gays. But no one else appeared to notice or care. In the League, gay was simply there, like so much bromide. Oh, we're gay? We almost forgot.

Putting on my researcher/analyst hat, I would like to suggest that the SCVL's Skills Clinics reflect the larger gay community's commitment to reparative experiences for our peeps. Allow me to explain. For those of you who find yourselves disappointed with my argument, please turn to the chapter on Team Mentors, where I develop it further.

The spirit of inclusion, support, and encouragement evident at the Skills Clinics is a reaction to the common experience of gays having grown up feeling ostracized, left out, abject. As a community, gays unify around the idea that we, as a collective, have been mistreated by society. Thus, as a corrective, the SCVL—as well as other gay volleyball leagues I've researched online—aim to be super hospitable. We welcome everyone regardless of skill level. The Skills Clinics help newer players feel welcomed and included. They foster a sense of belonging.

The SCVL is not perfect, however. We are certainly not a gay utopia. Yes, we claim that all are welcome, but upon closer inspection, some appear to be more welcome than others. Those with more advanced volleyball skills have an easier time of climbing

the social ladder. Skills, it seems, are an important commodity within the League. After all, this is a sporting community. We can't deny the fact that within the world of sport, skills are valued. Some people will always be better at playing the game than others. In an attempt to level the playing field, then, the SCVL offers Skills Clinics to bring individuals with less advanced skills up to speed. To prevent a reiteration of inequalities gays experience in our day-to-day, dog-eat-dog world, the SCVL provides Skills Clinics that are *remedial*—not only in the sense that they are reparative, but also in the sense that they recuperate presumed deficiencies in our development. With improved knowledge and skills, we fare better in the social field that is gay volleyball.

As a pupil in the SCVL Skills Clinics, I often complained about them. But that's because I'm a bad student. I'm too impatient. I want it now. Whether the 'it' in question is volleyball skill or a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, I don't like to wait for it. I need a good shrink.

To summarize, the SCVL provides Skills Clinics to try and right some of the wrongs gays have suffered as a community. All well and good. But how have the Skills Clinics impacted my gay identity? My answer will probably be too simple for readers expecting profundity.

The Skills Clinics (in addition to other League practices I examine in subsequent chapters) took the focus off of my gay. That is to say, they promoted the banalization of gay for me. During the Clinics, I was focused on playing volleyball. I worked on my coordination, my timing, my hand movements, my footwork. My body was used in the service of volleyball. I was not me. I was playing volleyball. I was not a man. I was playing volleyball. I was not thinking. I was playing volleyball. I was not a gay. I was



volleyball. Gay schmay. The only thing that made me gay was the fact that I played in a gay league. And as we've seen, gay volleyball equals gay. Gay volleyball equals fun.

Gay = fun. Having fun, I was gay.

*Keilan, your logic is scurrilous.*

Believe me, it only gets worse ☺

## **Chapter 4: Team Selection**

### **Team Selection: My Experiences**

As we saw in the last chapter, Skills Clinics are a place where members' skills are not only worked over, but they are also assessed to determine what kind of player each individual is. People's skills are a synecdoche for the people themselves. We know each other by our skills. Who's Allen? Oh, he's the setter on so-and-so's team. Is he the guy with the really tough serve? Yeah, that's him.

We are typed. We are sorted, herded, grouped, taxonomized according to skills. Nowhere is this more evident than during the team selection procedures the Board uses to create what they hope will be fair and balanced teams.

When I first joined the League in September of 2004, I didn't know how teams were formed. All I knew was that we had a kick-off party at a gay bar one night, and team rosters were posted on the wall. Presto! I was on a team.

My first team was great. I still carry fond memories of the Power Tools. We weren't the best in the League that season, nor were we the worst. But we were a fun bunch, and I enjoyed getting to know them. It was the highlight of each week. As I sat in class at Duquesne, I looked forward to the weekend when I could play volleyball with my new friends.

At the end of the fall 2004 season came the spring 2005 season, naturally. Whereas the fall season had been open to anyone who wished to play, the spring season was competitive, intended for more advanced players. Here's how it worked back then: In the fall season, the Board formed our teams so that no one was left out. In the spring season, however, members divided themselves into teams. As such, some of the weaker

players didn't make it onto teams. Fortunately, I was a decent enough player that I was invited to be on a competitive team my first spring. We ended up doing well, finishing in second place, as I recall. Not that it matters.

*You keep telling yourself that, Keilan. You say winning isn't everything, but you do like to win!*

And so, things progressed likewise for a few years. Each fall, I was placed on a team by the Board—not really knowing how. Each spring, I joined up with my competitive team, which varied by only a member or two from one year to the next. Back in those days, once a player was on a competitive team, s/he would most likely remain on that same team the following spring. In fact, some of the competitive teams had been together upwards of ten years.

But how did the Board form our fall teams? I never knew. It was a mystery—or at least it was to me—until September of 2007, when I encountered a Board member at a social gathering and casually asked how fall teams were formed. A fieldnote describing that conversation is dated September 28, 2007:

Okay, so [a Board member] told me tonight how they pick teams. This is good info. [S/he] gave me the inside scoop. What they do is rank the top 9 players in the League (because there are to be 9 teams). Those 9 players go on teams 1-9. Then, they take the 2<sup>nd</sup> best group of 9 players and put #18 on a team with #1. #17 goes with #2, *et ainsi de suite*. Then they rank the 9 worst players. The very worst goes with #1. The second worst with #2, and so on. Then, they have lots of leftover players with roughly the same skill level. These people are placed on teams aleatorily—with the help of a deck of playing cards. So, the final teams are presumed to be somewhat equal.

Up until my conversation with this Board member, I'd thought team selection was a top-secret procedure. It seemed like the holiest of holies with regard to Board activity—as evidenced by the fact that Board meetings were typically open to any members who

wished to attend, but team selection meetings were closed. Sneaky, sneaky. Needless to say, I was super excited when this Board member gave me the inside scoop. What a great little sleuth I was. Doesn't that deserve a Ph.D.?

This Board member was transparent in explaining the process to me. S/he demystified team selection. After this conversation, it made sense to me, however, why the Board wouldn't want lay members attending the team selection meeting. People's skill levels are a touchy subject. I would hate to know that I was ranked near the bottom or, for example, that Nathan Numnuts was ranked higher than me. Better to let the Board do their thing behind closed doors. Sequestered. Secreted off.

A change in the team selection procedure occurred in the fall of 2008, when the Board split the League into two divisions. Now, instead of fall being designated the recreational season and spring the competitive, the fall season itself was split into a competitive and a recreational division.

Does that make sense? It's hard to explain without becoming too wordy. And I don't want to bore you, reader, so I'm throwing in this piece of performative (gonzo) writing to spice things up. Are you paying attention, reader? Stay with me. Stop yawning ☺

As I was saying: Instead of letting the membership form its own competitive teams (as they had done for more than ten years), the Board started creating them in the fall of 2008. Their reasoning behind this move was that they were concerned about the 'weeding out' that had always occurred from the fall to the spring season. They were trying to avoid the whole I-didn't-get-picked phenomenon reminiscent of high school

gym class or grammar school recess for baby gays who weren't very sporty, maybe threw like a girl.

That probably didn't happen as often for the baby lesbians.

In November of 2008, the Board surveyed the League membership about the implementation of two separate divisions. Although there were some complaints—from people who missed forming their own teams—for the most part, people were okay with the new divisions and the fact that the Board formed the teams. So the Board stuck with their decision. From the fall of 2008 forward, each season would be split into divisions; and all teams, whether recreational or competitive, would henceforth be formed by the Board.

### **Inside the Holy of Holies**

In May of 2009, I was elected to the Board, which meant I got to be part of the team selection procedure. An email from a Board member to all the other Board members dated January 12, 2010 sheds more light on the team selection process:

Just a reminder that those involved in team selection will have to pay close attention [during the Skills Clinics] to skill levels of new people! Also, [someone] said some of the girls may not show up because they “don't have to...” Please encourage them to so we can assess skills for team selection!

This email points to the taxonomizing function of the Skills Clinics, discussed in the last chapter. The writer instructs me to surveil players, to “pay close attention” and “assess skills,” all in the interest of grouping them into evenly balanced teams. As a Board member, I was the eyes of the League. To ensure that people were grouped properly, I had to size them up with regard to their skills. I had to rank them, worst to best.

Ultimately, my surveillance was intended to provide a positive experience for all because my job was to ensure that players with lesser skills weren't all placed onto a crappy team

they wouldn't enjoy. Rather, lesser skilled players—as judged by me—would be placed with people who had higher skills so that teams were evened out.

We see here the potential for a problem with our system, however, for some of the women Leaguers thought they didn't need to show up for Clinics that week. The problem was quickly resolved when one of the Board members, upon receiving the above email, contacted the group of women who weren't planning to come. Thankfully, s/he received word back that they would be coming after all. Crisis averted!

Following this series of emails, I observed and rated players during Skills Clinics. Later that week, I went to a fellow Board member's house to create teams. We followed protocol—putting the highest-ranked players on teams with people on the lower end of the skills spectrum, then drawing cards in order to divine, let fate blindly decide, what to do with the leftovers. Once we had the teams roughly in place, we went back and made some minor adjustments, fine-tuned a bit. For example, if there was a preponderance of women on a team, we might switch one to a different team to even things out. We tried our best to remain impartial, truly wanting each team to be equally matched.

### **What Can We Learn From the Team Selection Procedures?**

So. What have we learned about the SCVL from its team selection procedures?  
And the bigger question, What can we learn about being gay?

I'm starting to sound like a broken record.

As I examine the team selection procedures, I see League efforts at inclusion. But, then again, it seems I read 'inclusion' into all the League's practices, evidence that perhaps my heuristic is one note. If all I have is a hammer, all I see are nails. And I'm trying to be fine with that. Actually, I *am* fine with that. It's only when I have to

produce something flashy and new for you, bored reader, that I become self-conscious about my monotonous analysis.

Wherever I look, I also see the League's work to provide a reparative experience of equality. Thus, of course, I see efforts at equality when I examine the League's team selection procedures.

*It's like duh, Keilan. Tell us something we don't already know!*

Okay. You asked for it. But the problem is that whenever I try to say something original, I have to go way out there. It'll be a stretch. Please humor me.

As a culture, gays worship the god of inclusion and equality. We call this deity Fagra. A photo:



Fagra wills that all who come together in her name shouldst be equal, that none shouldst feel excluded. In the name of Fagra, gays gather to play volleyball.

As a League, we try to please Fagra. We aim to be as welcoming of everyone as possible. Inclusive to all. We have developed practices to ensure that no one dominates another. *Egalité à tout prix!*

In the past, there was a League practice that excluded people. That is, some players were weeded out as we passed from the fall to the spring season. This practice angered Fagra. Thus, she spoke to our oracle, the Board, who implemented changes to the League on her behalf. The League attempted to create a situation where people didn't feel excluded but were placed in a division appropriate to their skill level. This pleased Fagra.

That every team should be evenly matched; that no team should dominate the League through surplus of skill; that the number one player in the League should not be allowed on the same team with numbers two, three, four, five, or six: Thus is the will of Fagra. Therefore, the Board advantages weak players by putting them with strong and handicaps strong by putting them with weak.

But what, dear Fagra, shall we do with the leftovers, this bunch of folks with roughly the same skill level? There's the possibility that a few are slightly better than others, which might lead to an imbalance in teams. Help us, we pray.

Fagra's will be done. We divine Fagra's sovereignty as we pull out the sacred deck of playing cards. Using cleromancy, the Board beseeches the will of Fagra. The cards impart Fagra's will to the Board as they create teams. Divination yields fair and balanced teams. Equality reigns. Praise be to Fagra.



As a follower of Fagra, I am but an “errant particle of the Divine” (see Halperin, 1995, p. 74). Not my will but Fagra’s be done. On behalf of Fagra, I work toward inclusion and equality for the gay community, children of Fagra. My actions are not mine. They are usurped by Fagra. I am used for Fagra’s glory. Amen.

Okay, okay. I admit, a little melodramatic. But if you’ll grant me this allegory, you’ll see in future chapters how it fits within a kind of tongue-in-cheek—though nonetheless apt—soteriology of gay volleyball: the promise of salvation through participation in the League.

Am I the only one having fun around here? If not, you need to gay it up a notch, you butch reader!

## Chapter 5: Naming Teams

### Naming Teams: My Experiences

After the Board forms fair and balanced teams, each team must come up with a name for itself. A journal entry from September 28, 2007 about the process:

Coming up with a team name. So much fun. The dirtier the better, but it has to be clever and not overtly sexual. Or if it's sexual, it has to have at least one or two other connotations. The gays [...] can be total masters of language and punnery.

When I wrote this note, the 'rules' around team names were nowhere written or spoken. I just knew what made for a good team name from having played in the League for three years. Clever and dirty is great, though better that it not be overtly sexual. Puns, innuendos, and double entendres are celebrated. The goal of a good team name is to make people laugh. To have fun.

A year after I wrote the above fieldnote, the Board sent a League email (dated September 14, 2008) that pertains to naming teams. It instructed us, "Start thinking of a clever and scandalous team name." Interesting that the Board should use the word 'clever' to describe team names given that it's the very word I used in my journal entry from a year before.

Clever. Pleasingly suitable. Masterful. Adroit. Skilled. Ingenious. Witty. Urbane. Cosmopolitan. Sophisticated.

Team names are also to be scandalous, says the Board email.

Scandalous. Offensive. Heretical. Deviant. Shocking. Disgraceful. Defamatory. Libellous. Ensnaring. Perverse.

Some team names succeed in being scandalous but not so much clever. These are the ones that, in my opinion, lack innuendo. They are overtly sexual or raunchy. Don't

get me wrong: They're still funny, by virtue of the fact that they're sexual or raunchy. But they're lacking in cleverness. The following list of SCVL team names I would put in the category of scandalous but not so clever: Circle Jerks; Bitch Slap; Long & Hard; Blazing Hussies; Raging Pork Swords; Tops, Bottoms & Drag Queens; The Gangbangers.

Notice how they're lacking in subtlety. Long & Hard? Come on. That's just too much. They're still funny, though. I mean, right? Can you imagine being on a team called the Raging Pork Swords? Hilarious. But again, no finesse.

There are also team names that are clever but not so scandalous. Perhaps they're clever by virtue of the fact that they're punny, incorporating a volleyball term into the name somehow. But such names are not scandalous enough for my taste. The following list of SCVL team names I would categorize as clever but not so scandalous: Juicy Fruits; Aqua Nets; Y2Play; Volley Parton; Good Golly Miss Volley; Volley Ringwald; Volleylicious; Volley Lamas; Bump up the Volume; Ugly Bumplings; Humpty Bumpy; The Babysitters Club; Sweet Volley High; Vollelujah.

I must admit, Volley Parton is one of my all-time favorites. And Volley Ringwald is perfectly ridiculous. They totally make me laugh. But scandalous? Not really. Ugly Bumplings and Humpty Bumpy play on the word 'bump,' a volleyball move. And Vollelujah made my day when I first heard it, for I was already playing around with the idea of a soteriology of gay volleyball. The religious connotations are so perfect. And clever. These names are all cutesy, innocent, baby, which is perfectly acceptable. But the Board email instructs the League to be scandalous as well.

Never fear. There are some names that are both clever and scandalous. These are rife with wordplay and sexual innuendo. These I would categorize as both clever and scandalous: Purple Passion; R Dinks R Huge; Board Stiff; Power Tools; Casual Sets; Just the Tip; Multiple Scorgasms; I'd Hit That; Steel Fagnolias; Kiss my pASS; Volley-vous Couchez Avec Moi?

Okay, maybe some of them aren't so subtle (no classificatory system is perfect, after all). But their wordplay makes them clever. And they're scandalous because they're so deviant. The name Casual Sets plays on the sets/sex quasi-homophone, 'sets' being a volleyball term. Other teams—Kinky Sets, Tantric Sets, and Group Sets—have played on this same sets/sex quasi-homophone in the naming process. I've heard some people in the League say they're getting tired of the whole sets/sex word game. But I doubt this trend will end anytime soon.

Just the Tip is another one that plays on a volleyball term. A 'tip' is a volleyball move as well as an anatomical feature, if I may euphemize.

R Dinks R Huge. A dink is a dirty move in volleyball. It's a cheap move, a trick move. If you dink on your opponent, s/he might become angry, accuse you of not playing hard (a weighty accusation in the world of sport, where you're always supposed to play your best). The move involves going up for a spike, which is the most powerful offensive move in volleyball, but then lightly tapping the ball over. For the move to work well, it must be disguised, sneaky, like the drop shot in tennis. Dinks—do I have to spell it out for you?—also sound like a slang word for a certain part of the male anatomy. Our dinks are huge. Get it? Clever, check. Scandalous, check.

Volley-Vous Couchez Avec Moi? So funny. I love it because it's laughably stupid. It used to be my favorite team name, until Touched by an Uncle supplanted it. Touched by an Uncle riffs on the TV show title, Touched by an Angel, but throws in an incestuous twist that cracks me up every time I think about it. So wrong. Perverse to a tee. I love it.

There are tons of other team names—some 150 or so—I've written down throughout my research, not only of SCVL teams but also of teams throughout the US. I'd like to list a few of them, but I don't know which ones. So I call upon fate to help me. I shall go to my list and pull out every seventh team name to provide the following sampling: Vicious Sluts; Humdiggers; Rainbows; Bottoms Up; Porta Johns; Iron City Ladies; Mexican Soccer Moms on Acid; Lady and the Tramps; 4-Play; The Old and the Beautiful; Body Shots; The Percosets; A4DLiez; Big Gays on Campus; Rah Rah Ah Ah Ahs; Sets Education; Cannon Ballers; Service with a Smile; Sashay Away; Dodge These Balls; Kiss our Aces; Metro Money Shots; Mexican Beaver Brigade; Pearl's Passive Pounders; Pursuit of HappyNets; 8 ½ Cut.

I'm really glad these made their way into our sample. Iron City Ladies was a name I came up with after discovering a movie called *Iron Ladies*, which I will discuss in greater detail in a later chapter. For now, suffice it to say that because Pittsburgh is known as the Iron City, I thought it would be cute for our name to be the Iron City Ladies. My team was okay with that, so it stuck. Maybe not the most scandalous name in the history of the SCVL, but clever enough to meet the approval of my teammates.

I like The Percosets. It plays on the word 'sets,' as we've seen before with other team names; and it brings in Percocet, an oft-abused prescription opioid. Classic.

Rah Rah Ah Ah Ahs speaks to gay culture's love affair with Lady Gaga. Kinda cute, right?

Mexican Soccer Moms on Acid. That's one of the more random team names, part of a trend I've noticed lately of amphigoric or nonsense names. Kids these days. Someone from this team told me they came up with the name by asking, "What are we not?" They joked about how they weren't Mexican, weren't soccer moms, and weren't on acid; so they ironically named themselves that which least described them. Clever.

As discussed in my Introduction, some of the earliest references I could find to gay volleyball were from the summer of 1963, when gays used to gather in Laguna Beach, CA. Play was organized by a man named Bo Frieden, and his team was called the Bodettes. Definitely a scandalous name because of the feminization of the eponym, evidence of the gays embracing ironic masculinity, reclaiming sissiness, even back then. By 1972, there was a second gay volleyball team called the Majorettes, named after their sponsor Bob Major. Again, we see a celebration of ironic masculinity through the naming process.

Thus, we gay volleyballers have a long and colorful history of scandalous and clever names we have dubbed ourselves. So far I have talked mostly about the names themselves but very little about how the names came about—with the exception of my brief discussion of the Mexican Soccer Moms on Acid. I move now to a discussion of the naming process, as observed in the SCVL.

### **Required Elements of the Naming Ritual**

There is no right or wrong way to name a team. During my six-year stint with the SCVL, no two seasons were alike with regard to the naming process. It's not like we

routinized the naming ritual or followed a script when we performed the naming. Thus, any attempt to discuss the ‘typical’ naming process will rely heavily on the prototypical or the stereotypical. Nevertheless, in my mind there were required elements to the ritual of naming a team, without which elements I felt slighted or disappointed. These affects clue me in to unspoken rules about how to name a team.

Here’s a snippet from my fieldnotes, dated September 21, 2008, that gives one example of how a team name was chosen:

When it came time to select our official team name [...], I offered ‘clever’ and ‘scandalous’ suggestions. I told my teammates that in the past, I’ve been on a team called Kinky Sets and one called Tantric Sets. I suggested that, to continue this play on sets/sex, we should name ourselves something like Anonymous Sets or Consensual Sets. One person thought Anonymous Sets sounded too gross. Granted, that person is new to the League and had never heard some of the outlandish team names people have come up with before. No one had any other suggestions for team names, so by default we decided upon Consensual Sets. But that’s not the end of the story. Through a slight twist, our team name changed. One of our teammates was repeating the name to someone else a bit later and accidentally said Casual Sets instead of Consensual Sets. Our teammates overheard the misspoken team name and decided we preferred ‘casual’ over ‘consensual.’ I agree. It works well. Casual Sets.

What I like about this example is that it shows how variable the process can be. I mention a ‘slight twist’ in how this team name came about; but in reality, each iteration of the naming ritual is different in some way. They’re all slightly twisted. Typically what happens, though, is something like the above scenario. On the day we played volleyball together for the first time as a team, we took time at the end of our matches to discuss a team name.

That covers the when and where of the typical naming ritual.

When it comes to how, once again there is much variability. But one thing is constant: It’s rare (if ever) that someone insists stubbornly on a team name. We work as

a team to come up with a name. Thus, a required element in the naming process is cooperation or collaboration. Usually we settle on a team name once no one has any better suggestions. But there are times when a stroke of genius occurs, and the whole team just *knows* that they've found the right name. For example, my very first season with the League, someone suggested Power Tools early in the brainstorming process. It was like s/he had played a trump card, for we recognized right away that there was no need to continue brainstorming; we had found our team name. We all just knew we were the Power Tools.

To examine the practice of team naming, we should also look at what I consider an aberrant example. In the fall of 2008 on the day I was supposed to meet and play for the first time with my new competitive team, only one of my teammates showed up. I was disappointed that the two of us had to choose a team name without any input from the other members. Because I already had a felt sense that choosing a team name was supposed to be a collaborative process, I was uneasy about choosing a name without running it by the teammates who weren't there. The next day, I reflected on my disappointment in the following excerpt from my fieldnotes (dated September 21, 2008):

Five of us ended up not being there. So our team had to [...] choose a team name without any input from the others. That was too bad. There's something about it that was disappointing. Perhaps part of it has to do with the fact that we didn't follow the appropriate early-season rituals. I'm a man of tradition. I like them. They're fun. But yesterday wasn't typical.

I considered the team naming process an early-season ritual, and I was disappointed that our team didn't perform the ritual properly. We didn't cooperate or collaborate on the team naming. Rather, two members came up with a name in the other five members' absence. That felt out of line.



## **What Can We Learn From the Team Naming Ritual**

So, say it with me: “What have we learned about the SCVL from this examination of the team naming process?” And the bigger question, “What can we learn about those crazy gays?”

It’s like a chorus we keep repeating.

As with my discussion of Skills Clinics and Team Selection, I notice in the team naming process, first of all, the importance of equality, that no one should dominate. It felt wrong for me to choose a team name when teammates weren’t there to provide their input. I didn’t want to impose a name on them. We were supposed to collaborate. Looking back on that 9/21/08 fieldnote, however, I would change my wording a bit. When I wrote it, I seemed to think that my being a man of tradition is what led to my disappointment. Nowadays, on the contrary, I would no longer characterize my disappointment as individualized or idiopathic. In other words, it’s not because I, as desiring subject, was overly fond of tradition that I was disappointed. There’s nothing about my individual character or personhood that made me more susceptible to disappointment when our team broke from tradition. Rather, because I identify as an SCVL member, my identity is rooted in the traditions, customs, and practices of the SCVL. Break from them and I, the nexus of a We, feel disappointed.

Second, I love the fact that our Board instructed us to think of ‘clever and scandalous’ team names. It’s so perfect. Gays are without peer when it comes to being clever and scandalous. It’s what camp is built upon. And camp is distinctively gay. By definition.

Scandalous. A celebration and reclaiming of deviance. We embrace our difference, our outcast position from society, and create scandalous names that we wear with pride.

Clever. How could gays have survived as a species if not for our cleverness? Our rapier's wit is as instinctual as violence is with rapists. Our cleverness is a biological trait we've all inherited, ensuring our survival in a society full of Neanderthals who want nothing more than to lynch us. We've survived, thanks to our clever gene. Otherwise, we'd have died out long ago.

HA!

Third, I have a bit of a pet theory. It has to do with queering identity, never settling too long in any particular identity category. A queer ethos of constant change. An askēsis of esquisses.

Because it's my pet theory, I like to pet it often. Thus, I'm prone to overusing it to understand phenomena to which it may not necessarily apply. But I make it fit. Call me Procrustes.

In the SCVL, we are placed on new teams each season. We are constantly changing, never settling too long onto any particular team. Each change in team comes with a change in team name. We name ourselves over and over again. Now we are the Power Tools. Next season Tantric Sets. Next season Team Maverick. And so on and so forth. This constant changing of teams and team names is analogous to our ever-changing queer identity. Shifting identities makes us slippery folk. And if we can't be pinned down, I'd say that's an excellent strategy for resisting powerful regimes (Rickard, 2009).

Of course all analogies break down at some point. It's not like our ever-changing teams helps us resist powerful regimes the same way an askēsis of identity esquisses does. Besides, as I said in the Introduction, the gays aren't necessarily interested in resisting powerful regimes all the time or acting the way academic queers think we should. But again, I'm petting my little theory. It purrs when I do.

## **Chapter 6: Team Huddle and Cheer**

### **Team Huddle & Cheer: My Experiences**

Once team names are established, the League begins regular season play. There are approximately twelve Sundays in a season. Each week, you show up at the gym fifteen minutes before your team is scheduled to play, and you start warming up, which consists of whatever stretches you want to do. The shoulders are important to stretch. The quads and the calves are important, too.

When one of your teammates arrives, s/he joins you for some warm-ups with a ball. You bump to one another. You practice your setting hands, your overhand spikes. You warm up gently. As other teammates trickle in, they join to form a warm-up circle. The point is to re-acclimate your body to the game because, chances are, you haven't touched a volleyball in a week. After all, you're just an amateur.

The courts are teeming with folks warming up. Some are stretching. Some are chatting. Some are doing little drills, like the bump, set, spike, bump, set, spike, bump, set, spike.

As game time approaches, the warm-up drills become more regimented. Your team practices hitting on one side of the net, while the opposing team hits on the other side and from opposite ends so that you don't run into each other. After a few minutes of hitting, the ref blows a whistle and yells, "Serves!" which means it's time for your team to line up across the service line and practice serving. You'll probably only have time for three or four serves before the ref whistles again, signaling that it's time to huddle up with your team.

You and your team gather in a circle on your side of the court. The team huddle facilitates bonding amongst team members and an *esprit de corps* that energizes play, making it more fun, more gay.

In Gregory Hamill's (2003) ethnography of gay volleyball in Chicago, he says the team huddle enabled him to observe important conversations, behaviors, and activities. Being a participant-observer, he accessed league dynamics through the team huddle in a way he could not have through outside observation alone, he says. Some of his thoughts on the formation of ironic masculine identity arise from his experiences in the team huddle. For example, he remarks upon a team huddle in which the members do a cheer and then peek at their opposition to see what effect it will have. Performing a parody of the win-at-all-costs mentality prevalent in mainstream sports, these guys taunt their opponents, all the while nelly.

He also tells a story about teammates in a huddle feeling comfortable enough with each other's differences to joke about race. The jokes sound brutal to an outsider's ear; but in context, they're not only hilarious but also politically correct, if not politically mandated. They're a celebration, a triumph over racism, a corporate understanding that racism is stupid—so stupid, in fact, that we can laugh in its face during our intimate team huddle, you stupid racism.

It would seem, then, that team huddles are an important piece of the gay volleyball experience. So let's have a look at them, shall we?

In a typical SCVL scenario, and by typical I mean stereo- or prototypical, we gather briefly in our pre-game huddle. The captain gives a quick little speech—no more than 30 seconds or so—pointing out weak or strong players on the other team. After all,

we do want to win. Not at all costs, mind you, but still. During the huddle, the captain, advised by teammates, determines who will serve first, where each player will start out on court, where to put our setter(s) in relation to our best hitters, how to cover our weaker players, and all manner of strategy (HA!). As discussed in the chapter on Skills Clinics, we fags are serious about the sport of volleyball, maintaining its integrity by playing well. Strategy is not to be overlooked, faggery notwithstanding. Decisions must be made quickly, though, as the clock's a-tickin'. The entire team huddle lasts about a minute, max. Sometimes even shorter. In that time, we talk strategy, exactly what team huddles in any sport are for. (I'm being told by the updated *Harbrace Handbook* that it's now okay to preposition end with.)

We're not only strategizing, but we're also being gay. What does that mean? I don't know. But we're being gay. We just are. I'm being a gay, doing whatever normal sporty people do when they're in team huddles, only when I do it at the SCVL it's called gay. What's that about? I wish I could tell you.

The team huddle can go any number of ways. But what's critical? What makes the team huddle the team huddle? What's absolutely required during the team huddle?

### **It's the Team Cheer**

Before I talk about the team cheer as it is practiced at the SCVL, I present this little scene from Jarvis' (2006) research:

The team chant at the end of one game, '*Way to go Generals!*' [Five Star Generals being the team name], was subverted to '*Genitals!*' by [one of the players]. '*Hey I like that cheer better*', commented some other players. (p. 67)

Sounds like something a bunch of gays would do! They changed up a word to make it more scandalous and perverse. I love it! Gives us an idea of the kind of fun gay sportsters have.

At the SCVL, our cheers are equally fun. While we're huddled gaily in our pre-game or timeout huddle, we all put one hand in the center of the circle, forming a hand stack. The team captain suggests a quick cheer—improvised, spur of the moment, off the cuff. It's our queer rallying cry:

Captain: Power Tools on three. One, two, three...

Teammates: POWER TOOLS!!

As we shout our team name, we drop our hand stack toward the floor. The cheer marks the end of our huddle. Cheer complete, we enter the court, *prêt(e)s à jouer*.

There are variations of the team cheer, of course; but the preceding is the basic format. "Team Name on three. One, two, three...TEAM NAME!!" Sometimes, Team Name is replaced by 'Let's Win!!'; or if it's during a timeout and your team is behind, you might shout 'Side Out!!' on three. It doesn't matter what you say really, so long as you say something. Together. As a team.

In the fall of 2008, my recreational team consisted mostly of newer players. We were called the Casual Sets (as discussed in my chapter on team names). Given that I had been with the SCVL four years, longer than anyone else on the Casual Sets, I felt it was my duty to impart League customs to the newer players. In fact, a fieldnote from September 21, 2008 reflects upon my felt sense that I was "the one responsible for upholding and propagating our SCVL ways to the new initiates." I go on in the fieldnote to talk about some of the specific things I did to ensure that my team followed tradition.

The list, of course, included the team huddle and cheer, which I made sure to do before each game.

The team huddle and cheer. They're so much a part of what we do as a League. They're not only a time to strategize, but they're also a time to greet one another, crack jokes, gossip light. During the team huddle, we feel like a team, a cohort, a tribe.

In the fall of 2009, I was on a recreational team called My Lovely Lady Bumps. Our team cheer was always blundering. It didn't fit the rhythm, syllabically speaking, of the basic cheer laid out above. In addition to dropping our hand stack to the floor, we tried to bump each other's hips after saying the word 'bumps.' *Tried* being the key word. For some reason, our timing was always off on the bump; there was always confusion:

Captain: My Lady Bumps on three...

Teammates: Wait, do we bump when we say 'bumps' or after?

Captain: Say, 'My Lady Bumps' and then bump. On three. One, two, three...

Teammates: My Lady Bumps [bump].

Never in sync on the bump, but we came to appreciate our maladroitness as part of our Lady Bumps charm, laughing at ourselves and our lack of coordination around the cheer. When do we bump? It was our running joke, bringing us together as a team. We found solidarity in our quarity.

In the spring of 2010, I was on a recreational team that named itself Team Maverick, an ironic homage to John McCain and Sarah Palin. Our team bonded around faux enthusiasm for these two political figures, the furthest (farthest?) cry from gay icons imaginable. We had fun coming up with ironic cheers such as "Tea Party on three. One, two, three...TEA PARTY!!" Taking it very seriously, one of our team members even wrote a longer chant:

We won't let you win,



We won't cut slack,  
'Cause we do it for Alaska  
And for Joe Six-Pack!!

It was the longest cheer I'd ever heard in the League, and it always drew the attention of bystanders. As with funny team names, a good team cheer intends to make people laugh—not only the cheerers themselves, but also the opponents and audience. Our team bonded over the ironic cheers, essentially winking at one another. We got it.

A couple of aberrant examples of team cheers come to mind. These exceptions prove the rule. For example, on November 25, 2007, during one of my team huddles, our team shouted, “NO MERCY!” on three. It felt aggressive. Tongue-in-cheek, yes. But still, kind of mean. I wrote in my fieldnotes the next day that this cheer felt like a no-no. That's because there's an unspoken rule within the SCVL that team cheers aren't really supposed to be mean. On the contrary, they're meant to be campy and funny. To say ‘no mercy’ felt different. It felt off. Our cheers, after all, aren't supposed to be aimed like verbal arrows at the other team, except to shoot them in the funny bone. They're good-hearted, full of sportswomanship and mercy. Saying ‘no mercy’ broke these unwritten rules.

A second aberrant example of a team cheer occurred in the spring of 2009, when I was on a team called the Power Fruits. Our opponents that day said something in their cheer about tasting ‘fruit juice,’ meaning they could envision the victory of pulverizing our fruity team into a juice and drinking us down. It wasn't mean-spirited, I wouldn't say. In fact, I thought it was funny. And it was campy, sort of, in that it displayed ironic masculinity, making fun of the win-at-all-costs mentality. But it was still aberrant in that their cheer contained a direct message to us. Typically the cheers are self-messages,

intended to raise the morale of the individuals doing the cheer; however, this cheer seemed to cross the line from rallying cry to battle cry. Yes, there's a fine line there. And, again, it wasn't mean-spirited, but it parodied more butch or jock sporting situations where the purpose of the chant is to strike fear in the opponents. Rather than fear, it evoked laughter, so in that regard it wasn't an aberrant end. Its means, however, were out of the ordinary—not your typical SCVL cheer.

Not only can the team cheer be aberrant, but the mood of the team huddle—typically cheerful and positive—can be aberrant as well. An example from my fieldnotes on this point dates from February 15, 2009: “During one of our time-out huddles, [a teammate] said to me, ‘You’re not having fun.’ And I said, ‘No, I’m not having fun.’”

Um. So yeah. Some back story is in order here, but I almost don't want to give it because it would cast me (not to mention the League) in a somewhat negative light. But here goes...

In the spring of 2009, I was on a competitive team I didn't enjoy.

There! I said it! Even though I wish I could say I loved every moment of my SCVL experience, there were things I didn't enjoy. And for whatever reason, I hate admitting this. Perhaps it's because my thesis is that gay volleyball is fun, yet there are moments I didn't have fun. (Was I not gay in those moments?)

I was one of the weaker players on this competitive team and didn't feel supported or encouraged by other players. I realized during this season that, although the general zeitgeist of the League is supportive and encouraging of newer players, the more advanced the play becomes, the less supportive and encouraging it is. During this game, I made mistakes that resulted in my being yelled at. The instruction I received didn't feel

positive. Furthermore, the team in general just wasn't congealing that day. People were pissy with one another. There were bickering and all-around annoyance. So no, I wasn't having fun.

The pissiness made its way into our team huddle. However, the huddle also provided a forum for my teammate to comment upon the fact that I wasn't having fun. S/he cared for me. Fun being the goal of gay volleyball, s/he wanted to remedy any lack thereof. The team huddle gave us a chance to regroup and discuss our attitudes and behaviors on court. I expressed to my teammates that I wasn't having fun, that I felt 'yelled at.' Afterward, I regretted saying this because I thought it made me look like a weakling. But now that I'm two years removed from the incident in question, I stand by my original self, the self that was feeling yelled at, the self that felt something was off about what was going on around me. To be sure, I wasn't having fun because being yelled at is not what I had come to know and love about the SCVL. Where was the support and encouragement? It was there in the recreational division. But I guess in the competitive division it wasn't as present. In any case, the team huddle was an opportunity to voice my displeasure and for my teammate to care and express concern for me. Long story short (too late, right?), after this team huddle, people's attitudes improved, and I felt better about our team.

### **What Can We Learn From the Team Huddle & Cheer?**

I was talking just the other day with a straight friend of mine who played for several years in a mainstream community volleyball league. He told me that his team always held huddles and did little cheers. Sort of like the SCVL, but not really. 'Cause we're gay and they're not.

What, then, can we learn about the SCVL from our version of the team huddle and cheer? And the bigger question, What can we learn about being gay?

Funny you should ask such novel and interesting questions!

As in other chapters, we see that the SCVL is committed to having fun. In our team huddles, we cheer, which is a fun act in and of itself. Raising one's voice in solidarity with others is intrinsically fun. Just try it sometime. It puts the lungs to good use. Like singing, it feels good in the body. It surely releases endorphins. It's hard to be glum when chanting rhythmically and loudly. In unison.

The SCVL is committed to having fun. We all know it. The one day I wasn't having fun, it became an issue during our team huddle. My teammate recognized my aberrant glumness and helped to cure it. My mood and attitude were worked on in the context of the team huddle. We restored my experience to its rightful place of fun.

Fun, fun, fun. Gay volleyball is fun.

The SCVL is generally supportive and encouraging, especially in the recreational division. Team cheers are not battle cries intended to intimidate opponents. Rather, they are rallying cries, summoning strength, focus, and teamwork. If there is the occasional battle cry, it is ironic, a parody of hegemonic masculinity. The ironic battle cry, rather than taunting the opponent, mocks masculinity and evokes laughter. Or if the opponent is taunted, it's all in good fun.

The SCVL is welcoming. People take it upon themselves to greet one another, chit-chat, crack jokes during the team huddle. Even if you don't know many people in the League, at least you know your teammates; and a mini-culture develops, complete with inside jokes and distinctive (tribal) mannerisms and customs. As a full member,

your input in the huddle—in the strategizing, in the hand stack, in the team cheer—is vital to the functioning of the team. You contribute. You belong.

And what does this say about gay?

The team huddle and cheer, as found in the SCVL, are decidedly gay. Wanna know how? Drum roll, please...

The five things that make SCVL team huddles and cheers super gay are the following:

- 1) Super gay people are the ones performing the huddle and cheer.
- 2) Our wrists, engaged in hand stack, are 27.84% limper than yours. Super gay.
- 3) Our cheer, if instruments are calibrated, is 48.72% lispier than yours. Super duper calibratedly gay.
- 4) Our loafers, not the best shoes for volleyball mind you, are 69% lighter than yours. Quadruple, quintuple gay.
- 5) We're super gay. Let's face it.

So what have we learned from the SCVL by looking at the team huddle and cheer? And what have we learned about being gay?

*You're getting there, Keilan. Keep going. We want to hear what you have to say. We're the reader. We hang on your every word.*

We've learned that being gay is circular. What makes me gay is the fact that I'm gay. What makes you not gay is the fact that you're not gay. What makes gay volleyball gay is the fact that it's gay.

*Horrible logic, Keilan.*

We've learned that gay team huddles, like those in Hamill's (2003) ethnography, can be read as a backdrop for an unfolding of ironic masculinity.

We've learned that I like to call things in the SCVL aberrant when they don't fit with what I expect. If a team cheer sounds too merciless or taunting, I bristle. And my bristling makes its way onto the page. I bristle it down. In writing. As an insider in the League, whether I'm aware of how it happened or not, I bear the unwritten rules. I wear them. I enact them. Week after week, I abided (abade? abode?) by them. I obeyed them. A mysterious and invisible process imbued me with knowledge of how to act, think, live—how to be—within the League. In my fieldnotes, then, I reflect upon ways in which the unspoken rules were broken. How being was not to be.

## Chapter 7: Team Mentors

### Team Mentors: My Experiences

It is important that you understand the subject position of team mentor; so, even though you're getting sick of my dissertation, please read this chapter carefully and thoughtfully.

Mentors were first known as 'buddies' whose role was

to help the new members learn skills, understand League and Game rules, and simply provide support [...]. This system will help us accomplish our Mission by ensuring that new members feel welcome and that beginners have the opportunity to learn the game and practice skills in a supportive environment. The Board thanks you in advance for your help and cooperation. (Email from the Board to SCVL membership, ca. August 1998)

In the fall of 1998, when this email was written, the Board made a significant change to the organization. The fall became a recreational season, and the spring competitive. In order to retain players, they also implemented this 'buddy system,' a strategy aimed at helping new members learn skills and understand League and Game rules. It was thought that the buddy system would provide the support new members needed to feel welcomed; thus, new players would stick around and, ultimately, the League would grow. The manifest destiny of gay volleyball.

By the time I joined the League in 2004, there was no visible buddy system in place. Or at least no one identified as a 'buddy.' However, there were people who acted as lay teachers. In fact, most returning members appeared comfortable teaching. Each week I received instruction from other players on where to stand, how to hit properly, and so forth. This was great. I wanted to improve, after all.

The next iteration of the buddy system, like the first one, came when the Board implemented a structural change to the organization. Unless you zoned out in previous

chapters or I did a piss-poor job of holding your attention as I explained the process, you will remember that the fall 2008 season was split in two. During the summer leading up to this split, I attended Board meetings where they discussed the upcoming change. As part of the plan, they wanted ‘ambassadors’ or ‘mentors’ from the more competitive division to play in the recreational division. Selected by the Board as an ‘ambassador,’ I was enthusiastic about my new role.

It’s fall of 2008. I find myself on a recreational team where not only am I the most senior member but I am also the Board-designated ambassador/mentor. As such, I feel it is my responsibility to educate the newer players, not only in how to play volleyball, but also in how to comport oneself at the SCVL. I take my new role seriously. I embody the League ethos. In a September 21, 2008 journal entry, I reflect on what it will take to be a good mentor, recalling the kind of teaching and feedback I’ve appreciated in the past:

I’ve found that the best feedback is the kind that’s A) to the point. Not too much verbiage. Just a quick little comment. B) There’s nothing personal about it. It’s all about the style of play [...]. C) There’s a one-on-one element to the criticism. That is to say, the criticism isn’t delivered for the whole world to hear. The critiquer approaches the critiqued and has a quick little conference. I feel this minimizes potential embarrassment.

A good mentor is to the point. S/he says what s/he has to say and moves on. A good mentor is impartial, objective, clinical, matter-of-fact. S/he doesn’t make critiques that are personal or *ad hominem*. Rather, the critique is of the person’s skill or style, not the person. A good mentor is respectful, not wishing to embarrass the mentee. S/he keeps the criticism private, pulled aside, in a one-on-one conference.

A couple weeks after these reflections were recorded in my journal, the Board disseminated more information about mentors. On October 10, 2008, I received the



following email from the Board. I reproduce it here in its entirety, edited for minor errors but emphasis original:

Hello!

You are receiving this message because you are an **experienced** volleyball player who is playing in the SCVL's Recreational Division this Fall. As you know, the format for the league this Fall is brand new. As you may not know, more than half the players in the Rec League are NEW players, either to the league or to the sport altogether.

One of the major goals for the SCVL this year is retention. That is, we want the experience to be very positive for everyone so they come back and play in the Winter/Spring, next Fall, and for a long time to come!

The primary purpose of this message is to ask for your help with our retention efforts in making sure that the new players on YOUR team have a positive experience. We are asking that you designate one person per team to act as coach/mentor/encourager to the novices on your team. This means giving the novices feedback and coaching (show them how to set their feet when they are passing the ball; explaining that the setter always takes the second ball, etc...) AND providing lots of positive reinforcement, asking how things are going, etc... Remember when you were a newbie and someone took the time to help you out? Now is your chance to share your experience and make a positive impact on our new players.

This message is going to at least 2 experienced players per team, so you can decide which person will play this role, OR you can share the role. One thing to remember is that we don't want new people to feel overwhelmed (i.e., everyone telling them what to do), so we realize there is a delicate balance here. So, perhaps one of you provides all the coaching, but both of you provide positive reinforcement. Remember, too, that the coaching can begin during the warm-ups.

Again, our goal is a positive experience for everyone and--ultimately--retention. Thanks in advance for your important help with this!!

The SCVL Board

The email emphasizes, on the one hand, being positive—everyone having a positive experience, mentors providing positive reinforcement, having a positive impact. On the other hand, too much feedback can be overwhelming to novices and should be avoided.

Very well, then. I will do all I can to be a positive mentor. Positive. Be positive, Keilan!

As the fall 2008 season progresses, I find myself constantly concerned with my mentorship skills. Am I being positive enough? In my journal, after games each week, I evaluate whether I've done a decent job. I note that I want to promote a positive attitude amongst my recreational team, starting with a self-reminder that it's not all about winning, Keilan, but having fun. I give high-fives to players and say something positive after points, whether they were won or lost. And as we saw in the chapter on Team Huddle & Cheer, I make sure we hold a huddle and say a quick cheer before each game and during timeouts to foster camaraderie.

Am I doing enough, though? Are my teammates enjoying themselves? Are they going to stay in the League? If not, it's my fault for not being a good mentor, Keilan.

At the end of the season, I reflect again upon my performance as a team mentor. My final appraisal of my mentorship skills: improvement needed. After all, two of my teammates left the League that season. Even though they said it was because of time constraints, in the back of my mind I always wondered (and still do) whether things would have been different had I worked harder as a mentor. Were there subtle negative team dynamics to which I was oblivious that led these teammates to quit the League? Was there a barely detectable inhospitality lurking beneath the surface of teammate interactions? I will never know. But I definitely felt responsible—my mentorship skills were to blame for their leaving.

It's your fault, Keilan!

### **Queer to the Letter**

After my first season as a mentor, I received an email from the Board (dated January 9, 2009). It shored up League expectations for the mentor position. In what follows, I perform a close reading of the email. It begins,

As you know, one of our goals in the SCVL is to foster skill development among our players. To that end, the Board decided this season to ‘assign’ mentors for each Rec Division Team. If you are reading this document, it’s because we think you would serve this role nicely for your team. Please let us know if you are willing (or not!) to serve in this capacity.

Okay. I like how the letter begins: “As you know...” It’s a kind of apodixis, which means that it appeals to common knowledge as evidence for the argument. “As you know” is a statement that relies on communal understanding for its truth, for its support, for its appeal. It is a matter of agreed-upon fact that “one of our goals in the SCVL is to foster skill development among our players.” It is corporately understood that this is true. It’s a given. It’s established. No proof needed.

“...one of our goals in the SCVL.” The operative word here is ‘our.’ The use of the second-person plural possessive implies ownership amongst the readership. It brings us as readers on board. It aligns us with the Board’s goals for the SCVL. Their goals are our goals as mentors.

“...to foster skill development among our players.” This is cool. To ‘foster’ implies that skills require care and nurturing, attention, purpose and intention to develop. And maybe I’m making a mountain out of a mole hill (it wouldn’t be the first time), but the root word *-vel* in development signifies an unfolding. In this case, the skills are what do the unfolding. The implication is that skills are latent, they’re underneath, buried, just waiting to be germinated. Although there are many ways one could think about how skills change—epigenesis or accretion, for example—our local understanding is that

skills *develop*. After all, the email doesn't say that the role of mentor is to *create* or *plant* new skills in players. Rather, the mentor must foster and develop the skills that are already latent in new members. Part of the allure, then, the promise of belonging to the SCVL is that skills, if given proper attention and care, if watered and fertilized, fostered and groomed, will become better than before through a steady and predictable course—an even development or unfolding. And skills, as we saw in the chapter on Skills Clinics, are a hot social commodity within the League.

“...the Board decided this season to ‘assign’ mentors for each Rec Division Team” (scare quotes original). Okay. First of all, I like the fact that the Board decided something. The Board is now reporting upon this decision *ex post facto*. It's a done deal, an almost indisputable decision. Not that anyone would want to dispute it because we saw above that their decision is supported by common knowledge, an apodictic ‘as we all know.’

Second, I like how the word ‘assign’ appears in quotation marks, scare quotes. They indicate a sort of *sit venia verbo*, which means ‘for lack of a better word,’ or ‘if you'll pardon my expression.’ The Board doesn't wish to lord its authority over the rest of the League, so the word ‘assign’ is too strong. In scare quotes, however, the bossy connotations are mitigated. The effect is that the Board appears less autocratic.

“If you are reading this document, it's because...” This document is a letter addressed to a second-person, a you. Dear you. The originally intended ‘you’ was a potential mentor. Now, however, you are reading the letter even though you are not the you originally intended. You are reading this letter because I've reproduced it. I've shared it with a new reader, probably someone from the Academy, probably a

dissertation director or a researcher involved in uncovering documents written not for you or to you and without you in mind. But you are privy to the letter. The letter has escaped, exceeded its original audience. Can you pretend to be the intended you? Pretend to be a mentor. What must you be as a mentor? Consider your actions and make them more mentorly. What would reading the letter thusly mean for your life and those around you? I stress these questions because I want you to feel the weight of being the you intended by this letter. To be an outside reader, a spectator, an observer is different from being the original recipient of this letter. I want you to please imagine yourself, however, as an original recipient and consider what this letter calls for you to do, how this letter admonishes you to act, think, and be. The letter is not just a casual read. Rather, it's a charge to a you.

“...we think you would serve this role nicely for your team.” The implication is that only certain League members would serve in the mentor role nicely. These are the chosen ones. Others would not serve in this role nicely, an unstated supposition reinforced by the context of this document—it has a limited readership. This role, then, is a specialized one, not available to everyone. Mentor as special subject position.

“Please let us know if you are willing (or not!) to serve in this capacity.” First of all, as with any letter, a response is now requested. In this case, the reader is now responsible, by virtue of having been audience to this document, by virtue of having become the you, to let the Board know something. Are you willing? Do you take up the call? How do you respond to this charge? You have two possible options: 1) I am willing, or 2) I am not(!) willing. And I (the you being addressed in this letter) must please let the Board know. I did, by the way. I told them yes, I am willing.

Secondly, there's the curious parenthetical and exclamatory '(or not!).' What might it mean? I think it's emphatic. It's letting the reader know emphatically that s/he is free not to serve in the mentor capacity. The Board, as we saw above, is not into lording its authority over the rest of the League.

Thirdly, I'm struck by the phrase 'serve in this capacity,' which I would like to break down into two parts: the verb 'to serve,' and the noun 'capacity.'

To serve. This verb implies service, of course. Devotion, of course. To serve means that the server is committed to something higher, someone higher. It implies a position of submission to a larger institution than oneself. Obsequium.

The noun capacity. OMG!! I just looked up this word in the OED, and here's the first definition: "ability to receive or contain; holding power." An additional OED definition reads, "position, condition, character, relation." The noun capacity, then, provides further evidence that the mentor role is a subject position. Not that we needed more evidence. The mentor is a position in which one serves the larger institution. It's a place-holder (?), a node (?), a vector (?) for the power that emanates from and circulates within this institution called the SCVL. The invisible power of the SCVL is made manifest, incarnate in mentors. They hold power. Yes, I'm being a bad Foucauldian—he was opposed to understanding power as incarnate anywhere. But I call a spade a spade. Mentors are power. Mentors have power. Sue me, St. Foucault.

Oh wait. Hold on. I vaguely remember reading something by the great Foucault himself in which he mentions "terminal forms" power takes (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 92) or its "institutional crystallization" (ibid, p. 93). Allow me to soapbox (as though I hadn't been doing so all along).

As much as I heart Foucault, I don't always find his overly cerebral understanding of power all that useful. It's a bunch of mental gymnastics, if you ask me, which you didn't, but now you will:

*Keilan, is Foucault's understanding of power a bunch of mental gymnastics?*

Yes, and thank you for asking, courteous reader. I wish Foucault had done more with the whole idea of 'terminal forms' power takes and its 'institutional crystallization.' That's because I would like to assert that a more practical understanding of power un.masks, pinpoints the faceless and relational power Foucault worked so hard to theorize. In other words, a practical understanding of power locates power within certain individuals. The team mentor, for example, is a terminal and visible form power takes. And not that we need to resist mentors, necessarily; but in non-SCVL contexts, where resistance is needed, it is helpful to resist specific forms of power, incarnate power, instead of trying to resist a vague force that is nowhere to be seen. A better strategy for resistance, then, is to target particular convergences of power, locate the terminal forms power takes. Again, I'm departing from Foucault here; or perhaps I'm pushing him to be more relevant to the concerns of on-the-ground, in-the-trenches activism and resistance.

Okay. I'm done. I haven't quite worked out my position here, but that's fine for now. I'm just a graduate student, sewing the seeds of an academic career, so I have plenty of years ahead of me to mull this one over. Now back to my reading of the letter.

### **What is Expected of a Mentor**

The letter contains information about how one can best be a mentor. In fact, the next section of the letter is entitled, "Expectations of the Mentors." Going back to what I

challenged you to do above, please think about what it would mean if you were the original recipient of this letter. What are your expectations?

Expectations is a funny word. It seems to imply that the mentor already knows what s/he is to do, how s/he is to mentor. The email simply reiterates what the Board expects. The Board is holding the mentor to a standard, a standard that is already understood.

**Expectation #1:** “Serve as the on (and off) court coach for your team. Provide supportive instruction, particularly to the novice members of your team.”

Okay, first of all, I just made a funny slip-of-the-keyboard that readers of the psychoanalytic persuasion may enjoy. Instead of ‘coach,’ I seriously wrote ‘couch,’ which is hilarious. The mentor serves as couch for your team? Perhaps this speaks to my unconscious desire for gay volleyball to replace the worn-out couch as an intervention in its own right for gay folk beset with hysterics and perversion.

Second. I like the word ‘supportive’ here. It implies warmth, nurturance, welcoming, non-judgment, hospitality, friendliness, and so on. All these words speak to the kind of atmosphere the League strives to maintain. Sounds nice, doesn’t it? Who wouldn’t want to be part of such a wonderful organization? As a mentor, are you able to provide such an atmosphere?

Third, there’s the word ‘instruction,’ which is different from the word ‘expectation.’ People who are mentors have expectations placed upon them. The novice members, on the other hand, have instructions given to them. The structure of the League, the structure of volleyball, replete with the structure of the rules, the mores, and ethics are imparted to novice members. Structure is imparted. Structure is instructed.



**Expectation #2:** “When explaining rules, try to explain the ‘reason’ for the rule, if appropriate. For example, one of the most difficult things for new players to remember is that the setter always takes the second hit, unless he or she calls for help. This doesn’t make sense to some new players, especially when the pass is coming [...] near them, or between them and the setter. Well, one of the reasons we try to enforce that technique is to avoid injury. In other words, the setter is expecting that the second ball is theirs and therefore is not prepared for collisions!”

Hmm, “try to explain the ‘reason’ for the rule.” The fact that the Board would like mentors to explain the ‘reason’ for rules is an indication of the Board’s commitment to democracy. A bit of a stretch, but let me explain. In an autocratic system, rules are imposed unilaterally. There’s no reason behind the rules. They’re arbitrary. They’re entirely capricious, whimsical, Kim Jong-Illesque. But in a League such as ours, there are reasons behind the rules. And the fact that there are reasons, and the trueness of the reason, should compel (or impel) the League member to obey the rule, not out of blind deference to authority, but because Reason can’t be reasoned with. In the case of the example provided, the reason is safety. It is axiomatic, apodictic, a given that our League promotes safety. We want our members to be safe. Safety is the reason for our rules, without which reason our rules might appear arbitrarily imposed or autocratic.

**Expectation #4:** “Provide positive reinforcement for everyone on the team. Acknowledge to the new players, for example, that learning court positions is one of the hardest parts of the game.”

Okay. The word ‘acknowledge.’ When one acknowledges something, one owns its knowledge completely. In this instance, something is acknowledged *to* someone else. Thus, knowledge is being imparted, passed along to new players. The knowledge in this case is that learning court positions is difficult. Where to stand. How to act when playing that position. How to interact with others in different positions. A whole lifetime of volleyball play would be insufficient to learn all there is to know about

positions. The subtle nuances of who does what. The moments you might choose to play out of position. The fluid movement of bodies in response to other bodies' positions, a ball, a net, and a court.

I won't condescend, learned reader, by pointing out the obvious parallels here between volleyball positions and other kinds of subject positions.

**Expectation #5:** "Explain the referee's calls to the beginners. If the referee calls a carry, explain to the beginners why it was called (even if they are not the one who carried!)."

The word 'explain' fits in with 'acknowledge' and 'instruct.' What is intelligible to mentors is not so obvious to the beginners, or at least that's the assumption of the author(s). So again, we see that knowledge, customs, structure are imparted to beginners via mentors.

**Expectation #6:** "Pay close attention to others on your team who are trying--with their best intentions--to coach others but are not doing it in a very positive, supportive way. We've lost players in the past because the most well-intentioned 'coaches' don't have coaching skills, and they end up frustrating--or pissing off!--new players. Just beware of this and provide the appropriate 'interference' when you can."

Okay. There's a lot here. I like this expectation. First, there's the 'pay close attention,' implying surveillance. Ding, ding, ding! Foucauldian buzzword!

Second, "pay close attention to others..." These 'others.' I love it. The 'others' are those who may think themselves mentors but aren't. Only the elect are true mentors. Only those assigned as mentors by the Board can be mentors. The subject position of mentor is not available to all, try as they might. Those who aren't mentors, these 'others,' have the potential to thwart the goal of retention. Thus, we must police these 'others,' lest they frustrate new players, resulting in our losing them.

Third, “we’ve lost players in the past.” Implied in this statement is that we don’t want to lose players now or in the future. Our goal is to retain players. Manifesting our destiny. Destinating our manifest.

Fourth, the scare quotes around the word ‘coaches.’ In this case, the scare quotes mean that the coaches are only pseudo-coaches. In other words, there are wannabe coaches, and then there are the real coaches or mentors. Readers of this letter are the latter, and they must guard against the forces of the former. Surveil them.

Fifth, I like the word ‘frustrating’ because it implies stopping, blocking, getting in the way of, thwarting, stymying. It results in a feeling of ‘frustration,’ or, worse yet, feeling ‘pissed off,’ as the letter says. The unspoken cultural norm here is one of freedom. We don’t want to get in the way of or otherwise block the development of beginners.

Sixth, I like the scare quotes around the word ‘interference.’ They seem to mean *sit venia verbo*, ‘for lack of a better word.’ It’s not real interference. It’s pseudo-interference. What would this interference with wannabe coaches look like? I imagine that, in keeping with League mores, this interference would need to be something positive—we wouldn’t want to frustrate those who are trying to develop their mentoring skills but have yet to arrive at all the skills necessary for being a mentor.

However, bear in mind that sometimes you can’t provide interference, the letter seems to say. Provide it when you can.

Interference. Another word that implies blocking, getting in the way of, intervening, stepping in, and so on. The mentor, then, must sometimes serve as a

mediator, interfering (hehe) between wannabe or pseudo-coaches and beginning players so that the League doesn't lose any new people.

**Expectation #7:** “‘Take the pulse’ of your players who are new to the league. Ask how it’s going and whether they are having fun. Encourage them to share concerns with the Board.”

The main thing I notice is that ‘take the pulse’ has scare quotes. This time, they draw attention to metaphor. Taking the pulse evokes the image of a nurse assessing health, the heartbeat, the life rhythm. Mentor as nurse. Beginner as patient. Health, in this case, occurs when the beginner is having fun.

The role of the nurse ends there, though, because the best practice treatment for disease (not having fun) is a referral. If a beginner is not having fun, s/he should be referred to the Board, the physician. ‘Encourage’ beginners to do so. They may lack the courage to do so alone, so impart courage to them to share concerns with the Board. Concerns as disease. Mentor as nurse or physician’s assistant. Board as physician. Fun as health.

The expectations end there. But there are two more paragraphs of the letter.

**Penultimate paragraph:** “Above all, we are looking for help in ensuring that playing in the SCVL is a fun and positive experience for everyone.”

There we go. Key words include fun, positive, and everyone.

Fun. A goal of the League. To have fun. I keep returning to this phrase: Gay volleyball is fun. If you don’t learn anything else from my dissertation, I hope you learn that gay volleyball is fun. The Board agrees, saying here that, above all, we need to ensure that the League remain fun. Fun. Fun. Fun.

Positive. Implies creation, growth, addition. It implies happiness. It implies good. It's the opposite of negative—destructive, bad, taking away. Positive, healthy, beneficial.

Everyone. The League wants to be inclusive. Unfortunately, however, not everyone experiences the League as fun and positive. So they leave. Some in a huff. Some with hurt feelings. And each time it happens, I blame people in positions of power—like my fellow mentors and Board members.

**Ultimate paragraph:** “THANKS IN ADVANCE for your contribution to the cause.” (emphasis original)

Key words include thanks, contribution, and cause.

Thanks. See Derrida. There's an economy here. If a mentor contributes, s/he's compensated with thanks. The Board is indebted and tries to even the score through a symbolic gift, the uttering of thanks.

Contribution. Being a mentor is a contribution. It's a gift, a sacrifice, and (as we've already seen) a service. Being a mentor is performed *with tribute* to the League.

Cause. OMG. One of the words I'd really like to study more, but my sophomoric etymologies won't allow. There's something around *cause* and *because* that I wish I could articulate. There's a cause, the cause of gay volleyball, the cause of gay sports, gay emancipation, the impelling force, the rallying point. We join together around a cause, a worthy cause. We cause our cause. We discourse [cause] about our cause.

Because? That's where it gets confusing. I guess the prefix *be-* here comes from the prefix *by-*, which is where my etymological faculties get pushed to their limit. I don't know what this prefix means, and I can't figure it out by reading the OED alone. I

think it can mean ‘with’ or ‘about’ or ‘near’ and implies proximity. Because. Near the cause.

But I want the prefix *be-* to be related the verb ‘to be.’ I’m sure it isn’t. If it were, I would have a great little paper. Because. Being one’s cause. Causing one’s be. But it doesn’t mean to be. So I can’t cause my be, be my cause. Because.

Okay. Enough already with the cause-because-be show and with the stupid letter from the Board. Long story short: They sent a letter outlining the expectations of mentors, and I strove that season to be the best mentor I could be. I had a cause. My identity as a gay man revolved around my being a good mentor in a gay context. The letter guided me in how to be.

In May of 2009, at our annual end-of-the-year Banquet, the Board created an award called the Mother of the Year, which was given to the best mentor. The award was named for someone in the League known as Mother who had been praised, season after season since I joined the League, for excellent teaching and mentoring abilities. S/he has been with the League since it was just a group of people who gathered in Schenley Park to play on summer Sundays. S/he was with the League when it went indoors. S/he has always been part of the League. Thus, it is only fitting that an award be named in this person’s honor. Mother of the Year. If I were still with the League, I would be trying to win that award. I would want my mentoring skills to earn the praise and recognition of my fellow League members. I would want to be the best mentor I could be.

### **What Can We Learn From Team Mentors?**

Bet you can't guess what I'm going to ask next: What have we learned about the League from this examination of team mentors? And, perhaps more importantly, What can we learn about being gay?

The second question is insanely dumb, which is part of why I love it and have been repeating it, like a chorus, since the first chapter. In case you haven't caught on to the irony, let me spell it out for you: THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN LEARN ABOUT BEING GAY FROM THIS STUDY! Sorry to disappoint you, but there's no grand definition of gay. There's no one particular way of being gay. There's no behavior, attitude, performance, worldview, essence, or universal feature that unites us as gays.

To suggest, for example, that being gay means being mentorly would be utterly ridiculous. So I'll suggest it, since I like being utterly ridiculous: Gays are mentorly. We're better mentors than str8s. We're innately good at teaching and telling people what to do. Because our essence consists of being mentorly, we naturally act mentorly when grouped with our semblables. There go the gays again, being all mentorly.

The first question is less dumb, but still kinda dumb. What have we learned about the League? Well, I've already said most of it. But since it's my job as author to be crystal clear in writing, let me go back and extract what we've learned from this chapter so I can spoon feed you the following nuggets of wisdom:

Point 1. Both the buddy system and, later, the mentor system were put in place when the Board instituted changes designed to grow the League. Buddies and mentors were seen as crucial to retaining new members. Retaining new members was seen as crucial to growing the League. And growing the League was seen as axiomatic, apodictic. No one gave a second thought to whether we should grow the League or not.

It was like, duh, Why wouldn't we want to grow the League, manifest our destiny, spread the good news of gay volleyball throughout the kingdom, win as many lost souls as possible?

Point 2. During my time with the League, I was super concerned with my performance as a mentor. In a way that probably no other mentors did—as far as I know, I am the only person who kept a journal about their League experiences or racked their brain to try and figure out the processes involved in gay identity development—I reflected upon my mentorship skills and tried to improve them in accordance with emails the Board sent out to mentors.

Wait a minute, though. To say that I improved my mentorship skills in accordance with Board emails isn't entirely true, for it neglects to mention League intangibilia, that which was *préalable* about the League, that of which I was already tacitly aware from having been part of the League for several years. Well before the Board outlined in letter form what made for a good mentor, I knew—call it intuition, call it magic—what it took to be one. I had absorbed the League ethos through my skin. How to be the best mentor I could be? No reflection needed. I just knew. The letter served to corroborate my tacit knowledge.

It was my duty to develop newbies' volleyball abilities and their understanding of League rules, mores, and traditions. As a mentor, serving in this capacity on behalf of the Board, I imparted the League value of fun at all costs (over winning at all costs). Hospitality was my responsibility, being positive my middle name.

I wish I could have won the Mother of the Year Award for commendable mentorship skills. But it wasn't to be. The Mother of the League, the person for whom



the award was named, won the award. I guess that makes sense. S/he best exemplifies the characteristics of a mentor, and everyone agrees, year after year.

Point 3. As instructed by the Board, I surveilled the League, guarding against wannabe mentors who, despite their best intentions, didn't quite live up to mentor standards. As a mentor, I was in a relationship of power with newbies, instructing them, teaching them; with wannabe mentors, monitoring, preempting, interfering them (wink); and with Board members, serving them, obeying them, obsequing them. I was in a relationship of power with myself, guarding my actions and attitudes lest they be negative.

Point 4. The Board tried not to lord its authority over the League. As we have seen in previous chapters, even though there are power relations within the League, we aim for equality and collaboration.

Point 5. A local belief of the SCVL is that everyone who comes to the League is possessed of a germ of volleyball skill that must be developed, nurtured, fostered. It is the job of mentors to facilitate this process. And it is the promise of the League that anyone who comes will improve. With further improvement come advancements in social status—to mentor, for example.

Point 6. Okay, okay. I'm aware that I was being dodgy at the beginning of this discussion section, not wanting to say anything true about gays, not wanting to fix gays in stone or otherwise represent gays once and for all. So let me backtrack.

Gays are mentorly. If you're gay, you're mentorly. Hardy har har. But let me be serious and see where this takes us. The fact that gays mentor one another in the SCVL

is an indication, in my humble estimation anyway, that gays see themselves as needing a mentor.

*Really, Keilan? That's a stretch. Gays need a mentor for what?*

The physician metaphor in the Board's letter to mentors says it all: If gays aren't having fun, this is a problem that must be fixed. It's sick. It's unlike gays to not have fun. So mentors must intervene. Just like straight people are known for being super boring and joining together in groups to do super boring things in order to \*yawn\* perform their straightness over and over again—look at me, I'm a str8 guy, drinking beer with my buddies at a sports bar while we watch NASCAR on TV and outburp one another—gays must perform their funniness. If they are thwarted in the act or otherwise incapable of fun, they must be healed of their disease, taught by exemplars how to be more positive, more fun, more gay.

To belong to the kingdom of gay is to have fun. Salvation from boredom, depression, ennui is the promise of the SCVL. Join us, and you'll have fun. We have techniques in place, we have mentors, we have strategies, rituals, and practices to ensure that your salvation is worked out week after week. The soteriology of gay volleyball.

Point 7. Gay volleyball = fun. In case you haven't heard.

## **Chapter 8: A Catch-All Metastasis**

It is obvious that [Foucault's] technologies of the self is a complex concept, and therefore, there is no clear formula that will detect which sporting practices serve as practices of freedom. (Markula, 2003, p. 104)

### **I'm So Over This Dissertation**

Basically, there are still too many things I want to say about gay volleyball as it's practiced at the SCVL, but it's never clear to me which practices I should discuss thoroughly and which ones I should touch on briefly; not to mention the fact that I'm getting sick of writing my dissertation and am now racing toward the end. It's time for this baby to fly the coupe so mama can have her life back!

This happens to us grad students. I'm sure you've been there at some point, trying to send off a fledgling dissertation that just wouldn't fly?

Well, in case you haven't, you should try it sometime.

Anyway. That's not the point of this chapter. The point is for me to quickly gloss a few remaining interesting topics. Why are they interesting? Because I say they're interesting. As I write, I'm drumming up interest in them. I hold sway over you, captive reader. I'm guiding you into an area of thought, telling you what to think about. You are now interested in the following topics:

First, Team Captains. Wouldn't that be interesting? They're not worth a whole chapter. They're similar to Team Mentors—whom you've just read about with great interest—but with minor differences. I'll gloss those differences for you.

Second. I'd like to quickly cover Team T-shirts. There are a few reasons I won't go into a detailed discussion of t-shirts, the most glaring of which is that you wouldn't be interested.

*Spare us the verbiage, Keilan, and get to your next point.*

Okay. Third, I shall cover the ‘Good Game’ ritual. It’s not much different from what you’d see in any community volleyball setting, gay or straight, so I won’t subject you to the annoyance of reading about it, even though it’s dreadfully interesting.

Fourth, I shall look at Reffing Duties. Each team, in addition to playing games, must referee others. We enforce the rules, even if only for one game a week. Sure sounds interesting, doesn’t it?

Fifth. I shall quickly talk about space—our queer sportscape (see van Ingen, 2004), our heterotopia (see Topinka, 2010, and Foucault, 1986). I know, I know, space is one of those concepts we could go on and on about, especially as it relates to identity. If I thought you were interested, I might write a whole chapter on the topic; that is, if it fetched me around \$500 plus a percentage of the royalties to do so. But no one’s offered me that deal just yet, so I’ll assume the topic of space is not interesting enough to cover at length here.

Finally, I will talk about time. I’m no phenomenologist—can barely even spell the word—so just a couple of quick remarks. Gotta keep it moving if I’m ever going to finish this dissertation.

In choosing these remaining practices to gloss, I cut out several other topics of interest. For example, I’m not going to talk about bodies. The gay body. As though such a thing existed. There are a multitude of gay bodies, just as there are a multitude of non-gay bodies. Some of these bodies play volleyball. And some are built in such a way that playing volleyball comes more easily. Enough said.

I'm also not going to talk about the fact that the SCVL is now a non-profit organization and has made sizeable contributions to gay charities each season I've been part of the League. Why don't I want to talk about that? Not sure. I guess I'm just ready to be done with this thing.

Okay, so that's the plan: a metastasis on six points. It should be short and sweet; so hang in there, dear reader, the end of this dissertation is near.

### **Team Captains**

So, do you remember the chapter on Team Names? If so, you'll recall that at the beginning of each season, teams choose a name for themselves. Well, what I didn't tell you in that chapter for fear you might get confused is that we choose team captains at the same time we're choosing team names. There's a bit of a sub-ritual around choosing team captains. Thought you might like to hear about it.

Sub-ritual. What I've noticed most often happening when we try to choose a captain is that everyone essentially says, "Not it!" In other words, proto/stereo/typically, no one jumps at the chance to be team captain. That's because the role of team captain comes with 'homework.'

It's not a ton of homework, mind you, but if you're team captain you'll feel it's your responsibility, first of all, to send a reminder email to teammates before game day each week. No worries, it can be something super simple, like, "Hey, fellow teammates, don't forget that we play at X o'clock on Sunday and that we referee right before that, so please be on time. We play such-and-such team. Should be tons of fun. Toodles, Keilan." Try to make them cute, concise, funny, and nice. No one expects them to be

smart or well-written, so don't be embarrassed if you never passed the third grade or breathe through your mouth. Text message grammar and spelling will suffice.

Second, you'll have to collect t-shirt sizes from all your teammates. This can be a tiny bit awkward, as body type is a touchy subject, SCVL or not. I've found it's best to be matter of fact, clinical, never flinching if someone on your teams asks for a triple-extra large.

Third, you'll have to make sure your team can supply enough referees for the games you're scheduled to officiate that week. In addition to yourself, you'll need at least four of your teammates there. This can be a pain, and you might get annoyed with your teammates if they skip out on reffing duties without a good excuse. But never fear. If you're short on refs, you can solicit help from bystanders who aren't busy. If that's not an option, you can ask some of your teammates to double up on reffing tasks—for example, keeping score whilst also being a line judge, which isn't the ideal situation but works in a pinch.

Those three things comprise the homework. Not a ton, but still a responsibility. Additionally, there might be informal responsibilities (like organizing happy hours or other social gatherings), but you won't feel as responsible for making those things happen. If they happen, fine, but no one expects a captain to do such things.

Aside from homework, you'll also have responsibilities on game days. For example, it's you who come up with a team cheer during the huddle. Of course, anyone can suggest a cheer, and most likely you'll take whatever suggestion comes first because you're so pressed for time that you can't always be the most creative person in the world.

You're also responsible for arguing with referees should your team get screwed over on a point. I won't talk much about this here because I'll get into it when I talk below about being a referee. For now, suffice it to say that arguments with refs are very few and far between. Usually amicable.

As team captain, you're also involved in a pre-game ritual that I'm not planning to cover at length. In a nutshell, the pre-game ritual consists of 1) presenting oneself to the up-ref who divines the gay volleyball gods' will (aleatorily, hence, fairly) to determine which team will serve first and from which court; 2) deciding, in consultation with teammates, how you'll line up your team for play; and 3) letting the up-ref know that you're ready to start when s/he asks.

Super boring pre-game ritual, hardly worth the effort to type it just now.

You can be a team captain without being the designated team mentor for your team. Team captain is a team decision. Team mentor is a Board designation.

And that's about all I can say about team captains for now. Told you this would be short. Skip to the discussion section at the end of this chapter to learn what you've learned from this examination. I'm sure you'll be fascinated.

### **Team T-Shirts**

As is the case with most community sports leagues, gay or not, the SCVL membership dues cover a t-shirt. All Leaguers get the same print for the season, but every team has a different color t-shirt. There's nothing remarkable about them. Kind of banal, really. Uninteresting. I still have all the t-shirts from my time at the SCVL. Hum. I wore one to the grocery store yesterday and mowed the lawn in it afterward.

Today, I'm wearing a different one, typing my stupid diss after some sweaty push-ups and squats. What else would you expect from a t-shirt?

Only one season did the shirt say anything overtly gay on it. That season, the back of the shirt prominently featured the name of a sponsoring bar and called it “gay owned and operated” in smaller print. That’s it. I still wear it hiking, for example, or to the gym. No big whoop. If I were closeted, however, I might not wear this shirt in public for fear it would peg me as gay.

Every other season I've been with the League, the t-shirt has just said "Steel City Volleyball League" and included some kind of logo, sometimes a website:

*ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.com*

For readers interested in a more interesting discussion of the clothes gays wear when they play sports, I refer you to Jamain and Liotard (2008). They analyze some of the outfits observed at the Gay Games. What they found was much gayness and pageantry off court in the form of gender-bending celebration and the queering of national and civic pride by way of gay colors and symbols. On the court, however, outfits were less marked by queerness than by sport-specific utility. The authors took this to mean that the gays are serious about their sports and dress accordingly. You should read their study if you ever get the chance. It's fascinating. Oh wait, though. You'll only be interested if you read French. If you want you can send me \$100, and I'll gladly translate the article for you. I'll retain the rights to the translation. Or perhaps you're not interested at all, in which case, please skip to the discussion section at the end of this chapter to learn what you now know from this gloss of SCVL t-shirts.

## The ‘Good Game’ Ritual



It may come as a surprise to you that the SCVL abides by the same sportswomanly code you'd find in a mainstream volleyball league. In community sports leagues, as well as in professional sports, there's usually a post-game ritual. You know, like when tennis players shake hands with each other and the umpire at the end of the match; or when football players form lines and shake hands with their opponents at the end of the game. We do something similar. But when we do it, it's called gay.

If you're part of the SCVL and you've just finished a game, you form a line orthogonal to the net, and you pass underneath, giving five to the opposing team who's passing toward you under the net. All the while, you're saying, "Good game" to each opponent. And you're making eye contact. There's usually not much interaction beyond that. Even if it's your boyfriend, you just give him five, say, "Good game," and move on. Rarely much more.

Having passed under the net, you and your team stay on the new court to play the next game. There are three games in a match—or at least that's the case at the SCVL—so you engage in this ritual thrice. At the end of the third game, however, you don't stay on the new court because the match is over, and it would be stupid of you to just stand there.

The 'Good Game' Ritual. Not much to write home about, but I at least wanted to mention it so that you'd have an idea of the sportswomanly practices you'll engage in if you enter the SCVL. It's rather banal, right? If you were to come to the SCVL and observe this ritual as an outsider, you wouldn't notice anything gay about it. But because of the context in which it takes place, you'd know it was gay.

## **Reffing Duties**

Hmm. Come to think of it, I could almost do a whole chapter on reffing duties. After all, there are several places in my fieldnotes where I talk about reffing. But I'll spare you the boring details and just hit the highlights here, starting with this nice little snippet from my fieldnotes about a minor dispute that occurred during weekly play.

Anyway, the ref had a nice way of resolving the dispute. S/he kind of yelled at us, and said, "Well, what do you all wanna do? Make up your minds." S/he was putting the ball back in our court, so to speak, to resolve the argument. We ended up replaying the point. I'm sure Carol Gilligan would have been proud.  
(November 18, 2007)

Never mind what the dispute was. The point, it was resolved amicably. The ref impressed upon us that we needed to make up our minds. S/he wasn't going to tell us how to do it. The whole scene strikes me as democratic.

At the SCVL, our referees are amateurs, just like our players. In fact, our referees are our players. We all ref. We all judge. Maybe if we received NIMH funding to study ourselves, we could budget for some professional refs. But no, that deal hasn't fallen in our lap just yet. For now, all players chip in. We do our duty. Obviously, part of your duty if you joined the SCVL would be to referee games. Whether you held a whistle and called all the shots as the up-ref or simply changed the numbers on one of our nifty scoring boards after each point, you'd need to chip in. No worries, it'd be fun. I'd teach you.

If disputes arise, they're mild. I've never seen one get out of hand. There may be bitchy comments under breath, but most disputes are pretty tame.

When disputes occur, only the team captains are allowed to engage the refs. That's one of the duties of a team captain, if you'll recall from my gloss on team captains above.

A team captain must argue with the ref if a point is worth disputing. This is a standard volleyball rule, not just our SCVL rule; but most of the time, our refs don't enforce this rule. That is, our unofficial house rules (nowhere stated) state that when a point needs to be disputed, anyone on the court can raise a protest (again, a mild one), and the point will typically be replayed.

Disputes. Even though it is super rare that disputes become heated, there is always that possibility. So it's a bit nerve racking to be the up-ref. Being the up-ref means responsibility, power. You have a whistle in hand, for crying out loud. It means that you're standing on top of a platform next to the net, and you're watching every point closely. You're in charge of its truth. You have the final say in who gets the point.

Kind of like me, the author (function).

You get my point that up-refing can be a bit stressful. Some newbies steer clear of up-refing duties until they've been around for several seasons and feel comfortable with the responsibility. The first time I up-refed, I had a Board member help me out. S/he stood behind me, guided me through the pre-game ritual of choosing which team would serve, taught me the appropriate hand gestures, instructed me to whistle when I needed to, watched that I held up a finger on the proper hand when someone scored, and so forth. If there was a rule I didn't know, s/he knew it. Otherwise I was in charge.

Mu-hu-hu-ha-ha-ha!! The power!!

Having referees—with whistles and all—makes for a serious volleyball experience. That is, you see that games are officiated, and you take them seriously. Yes, you're there to have a good time, but it's also important that you play your best and that all play fairly. Refs enforce the rules. And most of the time it goes smoothly. But darn

those iffy calls: when the ball lands super close to a line and you can't tell—it may or may not have touched it, no one knows. And since we don't have Mercedes sponsoring Hawkeye instant replay technology, we have to make our best guess. As a ref, you sometimes have to make an iffy call, a contestable call, a controvertible, controversial call. You have to intervene on the play and impose your call, your higher opinion.

Refs. Refs. Refs.

Rules. Rules. Rules.

Refs and Rules.

Refs rule.

Refs embody the rules. The rules have been made flesh and manifest, they dwell among us, form of the Ref.

*Enough with your word games, Keilan!!*

Fine then. I'll stop. Besides, that's about all I have to say about reffing for now. I'll try and come up with something more profound in the discussion section of this chapter. And I'll try to be less wordy, this being a metastasis and all.

## **Space**

Before I joined the League, they played in several locations—from college campuses to YMCAs. Since I joined the SCVL in 2004, we have played at three different locations. With each change in location came an accompanying change in tone, sentiment, or atmosphere of the League.

I'm not going to talk about outdoor volleyball, which is played in Schenley Park during the summertime. Whereas in the late 70s Pittsburgh gays played in the 'fruit loop,' a cruising area of the park for men, now players meet in a main area of the park, in

plain view of presumably non-gay people playing tennis, Frisbee golf, on swingsets, and so on. I don't like to play outdoor volleyball with the SCVL in the summertime. Too hot. If I'm playing outdoor volleyball, it must be on sand, next to a large body of water in which to cool off.

I'm also not going to talk about spin-off locations. By spin-off, I mean locations where smaller groups of our Leaguers meet to play. Spin-off locations include, for example, a mainstream league upon which some of our Leaguers descend on Wednesday nights in a suburb of Pittsburgh called Sheraden. Yes, a large group of gays is there, but can we really call it gay volleyball?

*What makes gay volleyball gay, Keilan?*

That question. It's not gay in Sheraden because it's not organized by gays. It's co-opted by gays. But that doesn't make it gay.

I'm also not going to talk about tournament locations. Our League has hosted a NAGVA tournament since October of 2005. Held in a larger venue, and with teams from all across the country, the atmosphere at our tournaments is different from regular weekly play. On a scale of 1-69, with 69 being super gay, like Bruce-Vilanch-in-drag-lip-synching-to-Cher gay, the tournaments are a 60.37, whereas the regular SCVL is more like a 59.82. That's because when we invite players from other cities, we have to showcase our gay, resulting in an uptick in gayness. Otherwise, the out-of-towners might not recognize or have anything in common with us. We put gay on display, uniting ourselves behind gayness for the tournaments. If you're interested in learning more about tournaments, check out Jérôme Caza's documentary on lesbian volleyball in Paris. It probably won't make you cry like it did me.

So those are the things I'm not going to talk about. Instead, I'm only going to talk about the three locations where we've held weekly play since I've been part of the SCVL.

The YMCA in downtown Pittsburgh is where I first joined the League. We pretty much had the whole fifth floor to ourselves. Thus, we could act however we wanted inside the gym. Yes, there were windows from which people on the sixth floor could look down on us if they wanted, and often I would see people watching us; but it still felt like it was our own space, that it didn't matter how we behaved. No one looking in gave a shit about how we were acting—whether we were hugging one another, cuddling, kissing on the lips, or whatever lesbigays do when they're together. No big whoop. It was our space.

In the fall of 2005, we moved to the Market House in a different part of town. Here, we had the whole building to ourselves. Thus, it was super easy to 'be ourselves,' whatever that means. We could camp it up, prance about, act however we wanted. It was our own little heterotopia where we played by our rules.

In the fall of 2006, we moved to the Greentree Sportsplex, where they continue to play to this day. Not only is this venue larger than the previous two, but it is also very public. There's a turf field next to us where youth soccer teams—ostensibly straight ones—meet to play. There are indoor softball fields in this same sportsplex where Little League baseball is played. It's a huge gym and always crowded with non-SCVLers. Before our League takes over the volleyball courts each week, a girls' volleyball club plays there. We wait in the crowded hallway for the girls to leave. Then we rush the courts, of which there are three.

In the Greentree Sportsplex, especially in the hallway while waiting for our courts, I'm less likely to act super gay. I'm less inclined to kiss guys on the lips, less inclined to talk about gay stuff. Because we don't have this space to ourselves, it doesn't feel like it's okay to be entirely myself there. Blame it on my internalized homophobia or being stuck in an early stage of gay identity development if you must (see Cass, 1979), but I'd say it's more a function of keen insight on my part into the inner workings of homophobia. Having studied it as though my life depended on it for the past 35 years, I can spot a dangerous (or even uncomfortable) situation a mile away; thus I know when to butch it up, when to retreat into the closet. I can always enter a safe closet by acting straight. I perform straightness to avoid stares, jokes, and other conflict. Keilan, the gay turtle, withdraws all limbs into his shell when threatened by menacing homophobes.

Space. When we have it to ourselves, we're free to be ourselves.

## **Time**

Finally, time deserves a quick look. At the SCVL, we are always pressed for time. We only rent the gym for a few hours each week, and we pack as many games as possible into that time. So if a team is running late, it's annoying because it cuts into my play time. If the girls club before us dilly dallies in leaving the courts, that cuts into our play time, and I get antsy and annoyed. If the refs in charge of starting our games are chit-chatting instead of getting the ball rolling, I ask them to hurry up so I can please have my time on the court. If my team has more than six members present for game day, we have to figure out how to let everyone play an equal amount of time. (Only six can play at once.) If the Board surveys the League and asks what people would like to see

changed, several folks will complain that they don't get enough time to play. We want more time. It's of the essence.

Another interesting thing about time as it pertains to the SCVL: The last four years I played in the League, we always played on Sunday afternoons. However, because of scheduling conflicts with the gym, there were exceptional times we played on Saturdays. This always threw me off. I mean, I got used to the gay volleyball routine: After Sunday volleyball I would stop for a burrito and head home to watch the Simpsons on TV. The next day, my work week would begin. By contrast, the few times that game days were Saturday, my whole week was thrown off. I would think Sunday was Monday. I would expect to watch the Simpsons on TV. I would be weirded out that I got to sleep in the next day instead of going to work. My week centered around volleyball. My lived time was governed by it.

### **What Can We Learn From These Remaining Practices?**

What can we learn about the SCVL from this gloss of several leftover practices? And what, pray tell, can we learn about being gay?

First of all, we see the banalization of gayness. We see it in the practices in which we engage. The ho-hum, everyday practices that make our League our League are hardly worth talking about. Passing under the net. So very yawn. Figuring out which team will serve the ball first. The plain t-shirts we wear to mow the lawn in. There's nothing in these practices that even warrants discussion. They're super boring, *rien de gay* about them.

Second, we see, as in previous chapters, a commitment to equality and fairness, sportswomanliness, invoking the gay gods through our divination rituals, providing an



unbiased experience for all. We see our refs (myself included) struggling with their position of power, not wishing for anyone to dominate. In one example, the ref put the responsibility on the players to resolve their own dispute. In another example, that of iffy points, we saw my discomfort enforcing the rules when they didn't enforce themselves.

Third, our rituals mark us as gay, whether we mean for them to or not. Because our t-shirts are gay, we are gay. The way we say "good game" to one another is gay, not that there's anything intrinsically gay about it; but the fact that our "good games" are said in the context of a gay volleyball league, they mark us as gay. Our gay emanates from us and our practices and marks our bodies, our space as gay. The SCVL is gay. That's what makes gay volleyball gay. Gay as circular, tautological.

Fourth. The closet as swinging door. You can go in and out. Is that what 'swinging door' means? Not sure. Would revolving door work better? I need some kind of metaphor for the closet (which, itself, is a metaphor) that invokes the idea of going in and out of it with ease. I kind of like my gay turtle image. S/he hides all extremities 'til the coast is queer. When the space I'm in is overrun with homophobes, I retreat into my gay turtle shell. No sense causing trouble for myself. Yes, I'm told that queers are supposed to be out and proud. But I like blending in. Does that mean I'm stuck in stage one of Cass' developmental model of gay identity development (Cass, 1979)? That I haven't synthesized my identity properly? That I'm not proud? That I don't tolerate my gayness? That my identity development has been stymied, that I'm a pathological gay? Perhaps it does. Perhaps I am.

In any case, I find it easier not to make a spectacle of my gayness. If I'm in a non-gay setting, chances are I'm not going to gay it up—unless the non-gay setting is the

Academy, and I'm trying to shake things up. The space (and others in that space) largely determine how I feel comfortable acting. Tempting as it may be to label me spineless or possessed of internalized homophobia, please don't.

Gay turtle. I wear my SCVL t-shirts to the grocery store, the gym, to walk the dog, to do homework, hike, whatever. Even if the logo on the back of the t-shirt includes the words "gay owned and operated," I wear the t-shirt out and about. However, if I didn't want to identify myself with the SCVL, if I wanted to hide all extremities in my shell, I wouldn't wear an SCVL t-shirt in public. T-shirt as extremity. Extremity as gay marker. Gay markers as things I hide in my shell. My shell as impervious to would-be predators or otherwise menacing entities.

Fifth. We really take volleyball seriously at the SCVL. We wear whistles while we ref. We order t-shirts, keep score on fancy devices. We follow volleyball etiquette, passing underneath the net. We have our captains, our scheduled game times, our serious space. We play in a location that's teeming with people who take sports seriously. Soccer girls on traveling teams, volleyball girls who play at the inter-city club level, little league boys hoping to make it in the big leagues. The whole sportsplex is wrapped up in taking sports seriously. These are people who want to play and play well. Just like us. We're there because we like sports. Except when we gather together, taking our sports seriously, it's called gay.

Sixth. I really have nothing more to say. If you're interested, you can ask me a question. I would love to respond to your question, especially in writing. If you're reading this dissertation and Google is still around, please Google me to find out how to

reach me for questions. I'll send you a thorough, yet distilled, answer. My promise to you, intensely interested reader.

## Chapter 9: Iron City Ladies

### Researcher as Event Planner

The intent of [interventions by community psychologists with historically disenfranchised groups] is to create a psychological sense of community that can break the cycle of oppression. (Garnets & D'Augelli, 1994, p. 447)

Because of my pie-in-the-sky notions about how qualitative research should be conducted, which ideas I garnered from an introductory course on community psychology (and participant-action research), my only formal training in such methodology, I naively insisted that my research should benefit the League. I didn't want my dissertation to steal facts from the League only to advance me and my career. I determined that, in order to benefit the SCVL, I would dedicate myself entirely to the League. My research methodology would involve participant-observation-volunteerism. My purpose in life would be to help the League in whatever way they saw fit. Keilan, the researcher, at the League's beck and call. The League's wish was my command. And because I'm independently wealthy, a trust fund baby, I was able to devote myself to the League 100%, without having to worry about where meals would come from or how bills would be paid.

Just kidding. I received a fellowship in qualitative research, which was nice because this freed me up. My life was dedicated to the League. I ate, slept, drank, breathed vball. It was all I thought about. I became crazy. I was not a normal gay volleyballer. I was a gay volleyballer on crack.

Not literally.

Okay, so where to begin this story? The story about the *Iron Ladies*.

It's spring of 2008. Shortly after receiving word from the academic powers-that-be that I could start my research, the SCVL Board sent an email to the League membership stating that we were embarking upon an 'expansion project.' The email invited lay members to join committees to help get things going. How exciting! Of course, I volunteered right away.

My harebrain went into overdrive. How to use my research for the League's good? How to make concrete, practical use of my scholarship? I lay awake nights thinking of how to help the League in their expansion efforts. In our expansion efforts.

Being raised a born-again Christian, I had no problems scheming about the kingdom and its expansion. The League had given me a Great Commission. How to reach lost gay souls? I knew exactly how. Well, not exactly how, but the seed of an idea grew from my annotated bibliography.

*Iron Ladies*. This was a 2000 film I'd encountered through my lit review<sup>2</sup> and had watched, thanks to Netflix. Set in 1996, the film tells the true story of a group of male-bodied people whose sexualities and genders weren't what you might call normal. I regret that I don't know enough about Thai culture to comment upon the subtle differences between what they call a *ladyboi* over there (in Thai, *sao praphet song* or, more derogatorily, *kathoei*) and what we call a *tranny* or *drag queen* over here. Others have written on the topic. For starters, you could look into a book called *Male Bodies, Women's Souls* by LeeRay M. Costa and Andrew Matzner (2007). The authors talk about ladyboi culture, and their interviewees even include a ladyboi volleyballer!

Back to our story.

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<sup>2</sup> Kaewprasert (2005) says, "I would suggest that an analysis of the text and context of *Iron Ladies I and II* in the future would be instructive" (p. 13).

Thailand. 1996. Ladybois. A group of them form a volleyball team. They practice and practice; their team is coached by a lesbian, or whatever the Thai equivalent of a lesbian is.

They do well in their games and rise through the ranks of the Thai men's volleyball circuit. Lo and behold, they end up winning the 1996 Thai National Volleyball Championship to the adulation of sexual weirdoes gaying it up in the stands. Or whatever the equivalent of gaying it up is in Thailand.

True story.

*Iron Ladies* remains the second-highest grossing Thai film of all time. A sequel, made in 2003, recounts teammates' back stories and covers their volleyball exploits in China following their 1996 victory at home.

Side note. I wish I could purchase Iron Ladies figurines. Pizza Hut in Thailand produced thousands of them when *Iron Ladies II* came out. If you're reading this and are in possession of one (or the complete set), please turn them over to me, generous and beneficent reader. They'll be safely stored in the Gay Volleyball Museum—which exists only in my mind at this point in history, but give me time and a little power, and it'll one day exist in reality.

So yes. *Iron Ladies* the movie. It was on my radar when the Board announced its expansion project in late February of 2008.

My mind spinning with ideas about how to help the League expand, I'm sure I got on everyone's nerves. No one else cared about the League as much as I did. For most, the League was just a place they went once a week, played vball, and left. Sure, they probably had several friends from the League they saw throughout the week, but I was

definitely outside of the norm in my desire to be engulfed by the League, to be taken over, made into the League's bitch.

On March 19<sup>th</sup> of 2008, I was hanging out with some volleyball buddies at a gay bar. They were probably talking about pop culture or fashion, which is all gays know how to talk about; but I brought up the SCVL expansion project, so we talked about that. And somehow, the spinning in my head resulted in a (hare)brainchild that would grow over the next year into an event I was super proud to play a pivotal role in.

*There goes Keilan, again. Playing up his role, singing his own praises.*

The initial idea for an Iron Ladies Event is best described in my fieldnotes from March 22, 2008:

[Tonight, at my favorite gay bar in Pittsburgh, I was hanging with a League member who] said that s/he had just donated projector equipment to the bar because this summer they're having a "Movies on the Deck" series there. S/he said s/he would talk with one of the bar owners about including *Iron Ladies* among the selections. Fabulous, I said. But not fabulous enough. We need a bigger venue. Like the Benedum [a large theater in downtown Pittsburgh]. And we need to fly the actual Iron Ladies—on whom the film is based—to Pittsburgh for our screening.

Once this (hare)brainchild was born, I became absolutely obsessed with it, nursing it, giving it my life's energy. Not only was my academic self tied up with gay volleyball, now my social life was, too. Heck, even my spiritual life was—for one night I had what some might call a conversion experience, tears and all, where I essentially dedicated my life to this cause. I was all about the SCVL and its expansion project. My *raison d'être*.

### **Colliding/Colluding/Collaboring/Coalitioning**

How to expand the League? There needs to be lots of publicity, getting the word out, putting gay volleyball on the map, making the SCVL a household name, manifesting the destiny (destinating the manifest) of gay volleyball.

To destinate the manifest of gay volleyball, I figured we would need partners in crime. After all, I had been to conferences and seminars on activism and community building where the word *coalition* was bandied about. So let's see: film project, Pittsburgh, lesbigay, coalition.

Eureka! Let's approach the Pittsburgh Lesbian and Gay Film Society (PLGFS) to see if they'll partner with us!

I knew that we had connections to the PLGFS through one of our SCVL members. So why not strengthen that alliance? After all, in my literature review I had stumbled across a *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* article (Lyons, 2006) for which a PLGFS Board member and an SCVL Board member were both interviewed. Each stated separately that s/he would like to see more collaboration between the two organizations! Yet such a collaboration had never been attempted. It appeared to me that the desire was in place, the groundwork had already been laid for a coalition. All I had to do, then, was tie some knots.

Keep in mind that I was but a lay member of the League. But the Board had asked for volunteers to help with the expansion efforts. They wanted ideas emailed to them. And I had what I thought was a fabulous idea, so I proposed my idea to the Board in email form on March 24, 2008:

Dear Board,

I've always considered myself an "ideas" man, so I'm sending some your way. I hope you're all well and that this admittedly lengthy email proves helpful to our cause.

My latest hare-brained idea in this, my perpetual brainstorm, is that the SCVL should host a screening of the gay film *Iron Ladies* somewhere in our beloved Iron City. I'd be willing to spearhead a committee to make it happen. This would increase public awareness for our cause and has the potential to generate substantial funds. I don't know whether any of you has seen the film, but it's a riot.



Spoiler alert.

*Iron Ladies* tells the true story of a rag-tag group of fags who put together a volleyball team which rose through the ranks in Thailand to win the 1996 National Championship.

Part one ends there.

*Iron Ladies 2* covers the team's newfound celebrity which endures even to this day and certainly hasn't hurt the larger gay cause in Thailand. I'm wondering, then, whether bringing their story to Pittsburgh might not help *our* gay cause. Here are some concrete ways we could make it happen:

A) We could ask [one of the owners of a local gay bar] to show the film this summer during their "Movies on the Deck" series.

B) If we wanted to make the event bigger, which I'd prefer, we'd approach a local movie theater to see if they'd screen *Iron Ladies* and share proceeds with us. I imagine the PLGFS would be kind enough to connect us with area theaters that have been friendly towards gay causes in the past.

C) If we wanted to make it even bigger, which I'd prefer even to the foregoing, we'd repeat the screening several times over the course of the next year in people's backyards as part of a "grassroots" campaign (no pun intended) to increase the league's visibility throughout Pittsburgh.

D) But if we grew this idea into the publicity stunt to end all publicity stunts—which I'm absolutely dying to do—we'd host our 2009 Steel City Classic Tournament as scheduled and fly the actual Iron Ladies over from Thailand to compete. I'm sure they'd kick all our asses, but in the process they'd bring lots of press as well as gay volleyball teams from across the US, hankering for a spanking. With the final game played and the Thai team still in town, we'd host a special screening of *Iron Ladies* before a sold-out crowd at the Benedum or some large venue (in collaboration with the PLGFS and other sponsors) to bring our publicity campaign to a close. Included amongst our invited guests would be donors and dignitaries of whatever ilk. Maybe a queer scholar-historian could even speak with us about the impact the *Iron Ladies* movement has had in Thailand, where gays and transgendered individuals, perhaps you're aware, have been allowed in the military since August of 2005. Furthermore, Bangkok's yearly Pride festival has grown exponentially since the release of the first two films. Just coincidences? Or were *Iron Ladies* the cause? At the very least, we can say that *Iron Ladies* have been a morale booster in Thailand and would be for our league as well.

E) But why end at the Benedum? The dream gets bigger and bigger when we begin to think that perhaps the producers of the first two *Iron Ladies* movies would be interested in making a third (working title: *The Iron Ladies Take Iron City*). They could shoot it right here in Pittsburgh and shoot to premier it here the same weekend as our next tournament [in 2010]. Hollywood stars would show up in droves. Glitz and glamour aside, the proceeds from this fabulous event would be used to expand our league. The larger gay cause, however, would not stop growing there.

As you can see, I get excited just thinking about the expansion project [...]. I'll be in Pittsburgh for the next year, devoting a large chunk of my time to the SCVL. I know we can grow, and I hope my ideas can help.

Gay power,  
Keilan

Wow. What an email. Some of the ideas would fall by the wayside (although I still dream of them). Others would come to pass. But I'm getting ahead of myself. This dad-blamed story keeps jumping out of chronological order—as evidenced by my flight of ideas and shifts in verb tense.

In any case, the Board must have been impressed with my harebrainery, for I was approached by them afterward to spearhead the project. From fieldnotes, March 31, 2008:

S/he [a Board member] had already read the plan and thought it sounded great. S/he told me the names of some people to get in touch with who are involved in the film industry. I think these people could not only help with the finding of venues but also point me in the right direction as far as creating a document of some kind. Perhaps a documentary. Perhaps a film. I think SCVL members should receive something about the league. It could be something simple—a DVD about the league. My dissertation is going to be a video project.

As early as March of 2008, I'm dreaming about making a documentary for/about the League. This idea would come to pass. But not in dissertation form. The two would remain forever separate. The documentary was made for the League. The dissertation was made for the Academy.

Moving on (which is my way of saying that I don't have a smooth transition from the previous paragraph to the next)...

My next step was to connect to the PLGFS. On March 31, 2008, I sent an email to a friend of mine who was a PLGFS Board member as well as an SCVL member:

Hi [friend, whose name and gender I will not disclose],

Do you think the PLGFS would want to collaborate on a film screening or two (or three) to raise publicity/awareness for the SCVL? The film we'd like to screen is called "Iron Ladies," which pertains to volleyball in Thailand (the second highest grossing film in Thai history).

I don't know what kinds of collaboration the PLGFS has done in the past or whether you're amenable to the idea, but I thought I'd ask.

I look forward to your response, and I hope you're well!

All the best,

Keilan

The recipient emailed me back shortly thereafter that the PLGFS might be interested in a collaboration, but first s/he would need to bring it up at their next Board meeting. I thanked the person and tried to wait patiently until their Board meeting took place to email again. But I just couldn't wait because a new development occurred. Email to the same PLGFS Board member to days later, April 2, 2008:

Hi [there],

I recently came across a short film called "Gay Volleyball Saved My Life" (by David Thorpe). Haven't researched it much yet, but it's been shown at LGBT film festivals and might be fun to screen alongside "Iron Ladies." I'll track down more info.

Anyway, I hope you're well. And I look forward to hearing about your Board meeting.

Later,

Keilan

You can't imagine my excitement when I stumbled onto *Gay Volleyball Saved My Life* through an online search. It was the perfect title to support any soteriology of gay volleyball I was trying to articulate. It didn't take long to track down the writer/producer, thanks to my excellent skills as a stalker, I mean researcher.

*Gay Volleyball Saved My Life* is a short docu-comedy from 2004. Written, directed, and produced by David Thorpe, it recounts his struggles with depression—being on the brink of suicide—before he became involved in gay volleyball in NYC. The film

explores the ways in which gay volleyball helped Thorpe find new friends, a purpose in life, and eventually romance.

I made sure to keep the SCVL Board in the loop as to my progress. From an email (actually a Myspace message, just to contextualize us into the Oughts) to a Board member, April 4, 2008:

How's it going? I was just writing to update you on the publicity idea.

1) I'm now in touch with a lady in Thailand who knows not only the original vball team but also the actors who played them in "Iron Ladies" and "Iron Ladies 2." If we raised the money, we could totally invite them to Pittsburgh for the screening!

2) I'm also in touch with a guy by the name of David Thorpe who wrote and directed a short film entitled "Gay Volleyball Saved My Life," which has won a few awards here and there at LGBT film festivals and what not. He lives in New York, but no lie, he was born in Pittsburgh and still has family here. So I'm sure if we screened his short alongside the Thai long, he'd be willing to attend.

My excitement is palpable, isn't it? I was in love with this project. And it seemed like everything was falling into place almost on its own. There were daily serendipities where I would chance upon a new piece of the puzzle: an email response from Thailand, a factoid about David Thorpe's being from Pittsburgh originally. It was as though the project was spearheading itself.

The PLGFS Board met and discussed a possible collaboration with the SCVL.

My PLGFS friend emailed me afterward (on April 6, 2008):

I just met with the PLGFS Board and everyone is really excited about the opportunity to collaborate with SCVL on "Iron Ladies." I gave them the initial information you gave me and I think the next step would be to develop more details. Perhaps we can talk on the phone or get together for coffee sometime over the next month or so to discuss this further?

OMG, things were coming together. There was so much good fortune smiling on the project.

In my mind, the way to expand the SCVL in Pittsburgh was to proclaim the renommée of gay volleyball in general. The more research I did, the more I realized that gay volleyball was already ubiquitous. But not everyone knew this. Thus, I saw it as my job to spread the good news. The gospel of gay volleyball. If people came to associate gays with volleyball, then it would only be natural for gays in Pittsburgh to join up with the SCVL. They'd just be doing what gays do. Oh, you're gay? Then you must enjoy volleyball.

Being an ideas man, I thrive on dreaming big. Being a Capricorn, I'm also practical and concrete. Thus, my harebrainery was constantly grounded by real constraints—finances, time commitments, League interest, and so forth. By mid-April, 2008, however, I was becoming weary of dreaming too much. Ready to translate dreams into action, I was chomping at the bit. On May 4<sup>th</sup> of 2008, I attended a PLGFS Board meeting to discuss ideas. From fieldnotes that day:

I've got more concrete data now. We're thinking that A) we're going to throw the event sometime in March of 2009—to coincide with the Steel City Classic Tournament.

We didn't answer the question of whether we'd be able to bring the actual people over from Thailand.

I think we're starting something cool. And I hope others are gung-ho about it. I think people are. I can't always tell.

### **Meanwhile, Back at the SCVL**

Things continued to progress on the project, even though my fieldnote entries were relatively silent on the matter for a few months. But then, October comes. The fall 2008 season is in full swing. I'm taking a leadership role in our newly-formed expansion committee. From fieldnotes, October 26, 2008:

I held an IRON LADIES meeting. The people there decided it would be better to not invite the whole team. I agree, although it makes me a little sad because I've been dreaming of bringing the Iron Ladies to Pittsburgh since March.

Stupid economic recession. The people in our meeting decided that even if we were able to raise enough money to fly the Iron Ladies over from Thailand, it wouldn't make sense to blow such a large amount on a one-time event. I agreed, even though I was disappointed.

But I didn't remain disappointed too long, for new developments continued to occur. For example, we decided to move forward with the idea of making a documentary film about the history of our League. Two bona fide filmmakers from the League became involved in this project. They called me the director, even though I never really knew what that meant. Seems like all three of us wore the director hat at times, the producer hat at times, and the editor hat at times. I was able to secure a small multicultural grant to produce the film. My time became occupied with finding locations to film, scheduling times to interview League members, and piecing together a short-subject documentary that was both heartwarming and informative. We wanted to debut our film at the Iron Ladies event, which was now set for March 28, 2009.

With filming underway and further details about the event ironed out, I began inviting influential Pittsburghers in hopes they would bring additional publicity to the event. On February 15, 2009, I contacted an openly gay City Councilman:

I wish to invite Bruce Kraus to an event called "Gay Sport Meets Gay Art." On March 28 at 9:30 PM, the Steel City Volleyball League, in collaboration with the Pittsburgh Lesbian and Gay Film Society, will screen three gay volleyball themed films at the Harris Theater downtown. Among them is the premiere of a short subject documentary about the 30-year history of gay volleyball in Pittsburgh. A pre-party will take place from 7-9 PM at the House of Tilden. If Mr. Kraus wanted to attend the events of March 28, we would treat him as a guest of honor.

The next day, I was excited to hear back from his office! Sharing the good news, I emailed an SCVL Board member right away:

I just now received word that Bruce Kraus totally wants to come to our March 28th film event and pre-party! So it looks like we're going to make quite a stir in Pittsburgh that weekend. I'm glad you put the Kraus bug in my ear. (February 16, 2009)

In addition to inviting Mr. Kraus, I invited members of the local gay press. We had an article about the event in the City Paper. A gay radio show advertised the event and even interviewed David Thorpe and me beforehand. Things were falling into place.

### **Finally, the Big Night**

I'm sure you're dying to hear how it all went, right? It was certainly fun, and I'm dying to tell it. But instead of writing the story afresh, I'll just copy and paste from my fieldnotes, March 28, 2009:

Okay. So, today, I went to [our regional NAGVA tournament, which we held the same weekend as the *Iron Ladies* event]. I watched and cheered. And took some pictures. Then came home and wanted to take a nap but couldn't. I think I might have drifted off for a second or two. But tonight was the big night, so I couldn't really sleep before it.

So I drank two big cups of coffee to try and jolt myself into schmooze mode.

I drove to the House of Tilden [the gay bar where we held our pre-party]. I parked on Smithfield. I went inside.

We had some last-minute shit to take care of. But we got it taken care of. Then people started showing up for the pre-party. I tried to schmooze. The problem with schmoozing is that you're never too long with a single group. You float. You land for awhile here with one group. Then you flit to another one. You make sure they're doing okay. You buy David Thorpe and his partner a drink. You make sure David and guest meet our League President, our filmmakers, [an event donor], etc. Oh shit. I'm such a schmooze. I hate it. It's kind of icky. I can imagine that people find it annoying. I'm even annoyed by it. Yet I felt impelled to do it.

Anyway. The party. The food was good. The people enjoyed talking. I moved amongst lots of groups.

Bruce Kraus came! I didn't think he would come. I schmoozed with him.

Oh. David Stanton from *Out* [a Pittsburgh gay magazine] was there.

Shit. I should probably send some sort of thank you to these people.

Yes. I'll do that.

Anyway. Then, what did I do? Oh. I blew a whistle at, like, 9 PM. I directed everyone's attention to the screens located around the House of Tilden. Then the intro from Thailand was played. [This was a DVD of the director of the film *Iron Ladies*, Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, saying hello to Pittsburgh and introducing the film. He starts in English, then switches to Thai, with subtitles in English. He switches back to speaking English at the end: "Be yourself, and enjoy the show!" It's so cute. I was able to get the intro through a very fortuitous email contact I'd made with Thongkongtoon's assistant.]

After the intro was played, I asked people to make their way to the Harris [on foot, less than a block away].

We got to the Harris. People were piling in, getting refreshments. Then we started the program.

[The League President] introduced me. He said I was his hero. That was nice.

Then I went up and thanked a bunch of people. I thanked [a major donor]. I asked David Thorpe to stand up. I asked Bruce Kraus to stand up. I asked people in the League to stand up. [...] Then [a Board member] from the Pittsburgh Lesbian and Gay Film Society announced their upcoming film on Thursday. Then I asked [a Duquesne friend] to stand and announce the prop 300 thing. Apparently we need to contact our state legislators or some shit (for such a political evening, I feel remarkably uninformed about lgbt issues). Then I introduced our filmmakers.

I'm saying then, then, then. But I'm not sure about the chronology.

I ended my speech by saying something like, "On behalf of myself [and the other filmmakers], we give you this gift. Enjoy." I'm not sure exactly what I said, but I know the words "gift" and "enjoy" were in there.

Then came "More Than Volleyball" [our documentary]. It was fun. The volume was too low. I ran back and asked them to turn it up. They did a tiny bit. It still wasn't as loud as I wanted it. Anytime people laughed, which they certainly did, it was hard to hear what people on screen said. We needed more volume.

I think people liked it, though. I, however, was sitting there thinking we should have shortened it.

Then came David Thorpe's movie. It was too loud. But people liked it. And it was nice that it was so short.

Then came "Iron Ladies." People were starting to leave at this point. That was fine. I knew that was going to happen. We were still left with a large crowd. They laughed thru the whole film. I was concerned that it was too long. And it WAS too long. But people laughed throughout the whole thing, so they must have been following it.

I was dead afterward. I just wanted to be home. But I had to do more schmoozing. And I had to make sure the place was cleaned up and what not.

Now I need sleep. I'm sad that it's over. And I'm genuinely beat. I'm done. My body has done it. I'm crashing. I need sleep. It's fucking done.



Yes, it was done. But a couple more things, unexpected things, happened afterward that were pretty cool.

### **Just When I thought it was Over**

Like a good little Southern gentleman, I sent out ‘thank yous’ to people after the big event. Mama didn’t raise no trash! Most notably, I sent the following email to Bruce Kraus (via his assistant/e), March 30, 2009:

Dear Councilman Kraus,  
Thank you for attending “Gay Sport Meets Gay Art.” It was an absolute pleasure to meet you, and it is nice to know that we have people like you representing our interests in Pittsburgh. I hope you enjoyed your evening with us.  
Best,  
Keilan

Email response from Bruce Kraus’ assistant/e to me, March 30, 2009:

Keilan,  
I have forwarded your email to the Councilman. He enjoyed his evening and was very impressed by the progression of gay volley-ball in Pittsburgh. He would like to present a proclamation to those responsible. Could you please send me a brief history of gay volley-ball in Pittsburgh and any other pertinent information that would be helpful? Names, dates, places, etc.  
Thanks,  
[Person X]

OMG. Given that I had already been researching the progression of gay volleyball in Pittsburgh, I had no problems gathering the information s/he needed. I responded right away so that gay volleyball could be whereas-ed and proclaimed (hehe). S/he then put the proclamation together. Here’s the final product, which was read in a City Council meeting on July 14, 2009:

WHEREAS, Gay Volleyball has had a long history in the City of Pittsburgh and Steel City Volleyball recently hosted their fourth annual Steel City Classic Tournament; and

WHEREAS, during the summer, in the late 1970’s and into the 1980’s, gays and lesbians would gather on Prospect Drive, in Schenley Park, string a net between two trees and play volleyball; and

WHEREAS, in 1990, a group of approximately 35 people rented gym space at Chatham College and called itself the Pittsburgh Indoor Gay Volleyball; and

WHEREAS, the league played at the Carnegie Boys and Girls Club from 1992 – 1994; grew to more than 55 members; established a Board and changed their name to Steel City Volleyball League; and

WHEREAS, between 1995 and 2006, the League expanded to 75 members and played at the Market House, on the City's South Side and the Downtown YMCA and sponsored its first regional gay volleyball tournament, sanctioned by the North American Gay Volleyball Association; and

WHEREAS, in 2006, the League moved to the Greentree Sportsplex, where they still play, the group has grown to more than 130 members, now has a Board of fifteen members, does charitable work to benefit Persad, GLSEN and the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force; and

WHEREAS, during the Fourth Annual Steel City Classic Tournament, the League also held "Gay Sport Meets Gay Art" in collaboration with the Pittsburgh Lesbian and Gay Film Society where they premiered a short documentary called More Than Volleyball.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Council of the City of Pittsburgh does, hereby, commend league members, Producer – Becky Brown; Director and Producer – Keilan Rickard; and Editor – Shawn Bronson for their outstanding efforts to bring this documentary to the larger community. Council also recognizes the Multicultural Arts Initiative and its director, Robert Reed; League Treasurer, Wendy James, and members Ben de Jesus, Steve Mrdjenovich and Ken Riling along with President, David Binder, for their efforts to present a festive celebration of the release of this film.

It was quite an honor, being commended by the Council of the City of Pittsburgh. How very proud I was! And even though there's no way to prove that my research efforts—what I've called participant-observation-volunteerism, giving myself over to the SCVL, being the League's bitch—were valid, I believe they were. That is to say, I believe I helped the League. For the League, too, was proud. The League celebrated itself. The SCVL, our once unassuming community, came to see ourselves as a crucial part of Pittsburgh history, our story told on the silver screen and forever commemorated in the annals of our beloved city.

## Chapter 10: Discussion, Limitations, Conclusions, Future Directions

The primary function of the homosexual group is psychological in that it provides a social context within which the homosexual can find acceptance as a homosexual and collective support for his deviant tendencies. (Leznoff & Westley, 1956, p. 257)

### Forgot Your Foucault?

It's 9:59 on a Friday morning. I'm taking advantage of generous professional development time at work to crank out a conclusions chapter. My overall impression: What a mess I've made of this dissertation business.

Quipus and Quelles. Why did I ever say that I would use Foucault in my writing? Looking back on the entire dissertation, I can recall very few times I've quoted Foucault. It's like he's remained invisible, my Q source. But rest assured, dear reader, Foucault has contributed, albeit silently, to my understanding of gay volleyball. Unfortunately, I have contributed very little in return to Foucault.

Foucault. I've said it before and I'll say it again here: I'm being informed by Foucault, but to call my methods Foucauldian wouldn't be entirely true. They're inspired by Foucault. Inspired by his spirit. Inspired. But I bring my distinctive style. My flare. I construct my own method (out of madness).

Foucault's interventions encourage us to detach from established knowledge, ask fresh questions, make new connections, and understand why it is important to do so. Given Foucault's generative role in intellectual thought—evidenced most especially by extensive citation and frequent discussion of his work—serious scholars of sport cannot avoid Foucault's formulations. (Cole et al., 2004, p. 207)

Being a serious scholar of sport (yeah right), I have been unable to avoid Foucault! He has encouraged me to detach from orthodox ways of writing for the Academy.

Foucault has challenged me to look at my data from an archaeological perspective. His archaeology, rife with discursive formations, objects, grids of

specification, *l'énoncé*, *savoir*, *connaître*, and so on. All these ideas have been present to mind as I've written my dissertation. It sucks that I haven't always known how to make Foucault a greater part of the writing. But at least I drew from his archaeology enough to know that my research needed to look at written documents, the what's-been-said.

What do people say about the SCVL? What do I say in my fieldnotes? The very fact that I could opine about this or that League practice was an indication—at least in my mind—that this or that League practice gathered opinions around it. And Foucault (1969) was all about analyzing “des opinions plus que du savoir” (p. 179). In English: “opinions more so than knowledge [savoir]” (my translation). If, for example, I bitched in my fieldnotes about Skills Clinics, this was only because Skills Clinics were on my radar. They were an object of discussion, not only for me, but also for other League members. I was in touch—thanks in part to my position as insider, thanks in part to St. Foucault—with what we talked about, how we griped about our ratings, how we classified ourselves, these practices that grouped us, made us who we are.

Foucault has challenged me to look at my data from a genealogical perspective. His genealogy with all its power relations, truth regimes, surveillance, heterotopias, subjects, and so on. How the hell was I supposed to treat all these topics fairly? I believe that I've covered them on some level. But I've written off key. You may have had trouble reading Foucault in what I've written. That's because I've written in Foucault sharp, in Foucault Dorian mode. I've written in quar(e)tertones, the interstices between the only notes we're trained to hear with our Western ear. I'm a gay banjo. My tuning is never precise by tuning fork standards. My A is not 440. My strings don't sound the right overtones. How off. How naïve. How wrong.

My genealogy, my antiscience, has played local knowledge—that of the SCVL—against a unifying theoretical understanding of the League (see Foucault, 1977). Recall my thoughts on gay vs. queer, how I chide academic queer theorists for imposing a normalizing standard onto the gay institutions they study. Instead of letting gay be gay, the queers want gay to be queer. How very colonizing! As though the queers, by virtue of being part of the Academy, know what’s best for gay, know how to read the gay situation better than the gays. Lay off already!

Foucault has challenged me to look at my data from an ethological perspective. His ethology—a word he never used, to my knowledge—the study of ethics. Techniques of the self, of self formation. Practices that work oneself into the kind of self one wants to be, the kind of self one wants to be within a certain kind of society, a self that gathers power around it in order to effect change, a catalyst self that rises through the ranks of a given institution for the betterment of said institution. For the betterment of said self.

Now we’re getting closer to the kind of self I’ve written about. How is it that the I became an integral part of the SCVL? How did the I shape itself into the kind of gay self it wanted to be, for the betterment of the SCVL to which it was subjectificated ☺?

Now that I’m more than a year removed from any regular contact with the SCVL, it’s easier to see the kind of self I became through the League. And it is easier to see how the kind of self I am becoming was shaped by the League and for its (continued) purposes.

The League wanted (and still wants) to grow. I, being a graduate student, studying Foucault, neophyte historicizing, took it upon myself to help the League grow by using my research. My historical research. With the League’s blessing, I became our

unofficial historian. I was convinced that, in order to expand, the League would need to know itself, be proud of itself, see where it has come from, celebrate itself, be moved by itself, tell its story.

In loving itself, the League would draw new members unto itself. More people would want to join in the movement—the progression of the League from outdoor play at Schenley Park to indoor League; from its first NAGVA tournament to a documentary about itself; from non-profit organization to commendation by the City of Pittsburgh; from underground history to archived entity at the Heinz History Center (which I’ve opted not to cover in this dissertation). If gay volleyball wasn’t a movement before I got there, I wanted it to be, so I used my influence for its purposes.

How to make the SCVL a big deal? I felt it my duty to convince not only the League, but also the larger Pittsburgh LGBT community that the SCVL had (and continues to have) something of value to offer. I felt it my duty to convince you, dear reader, that gay volleyball is an important part of the development of gay community. It’s worth investing in. It’s worth belonging to. Please join us. Manifest our destiny with us. Thy kingdom come, gay volleyball.

I promised a tongue-in-cheek soteriology of gay volleyball, and there you have it. I invite you to see it for yourself, insightful reader. You’ll find it written all throughout this document, the doctrine of salvation through gay volleyball. Vollelujah! Gay volleyball saved my life! The doctrine of fun. A community of faithful followers with whom I belong. A harmartiology that guides me to eschew the practices of mainstream volleyball with their win-at-all-costs ways; rather, I welcome everyone, I strive for equality, I value camp and camaraderie over winning. To Fagra be the glory! I spread

the gospel of gay volleyball. My great commission is to go into the world and recruit others for the cause, win lost souls for the kingdom that they may no longer wander in darkness but have fun like they've never known.

### **Limitations: Like I Have to Tell You**

As with any research study worth its salt, I'm supposed to look at the limitations of this dissertation. I could do this any number of ways. I could refer you back to my chapter on (auto)ethnography in which I laid out the limitations of this method. Or, I could try and think of some new stuff. Limitations. Litigaytions.

The problem with my research is that I have de-emphasized this final write-up. In my estimation, I've been dissertating for more than four years. And I have felt, all along, that my research was not a product but a process. It was more important to me that I help the League expand and publicize itself than for me to write a valid and reliable dissertation about it. This write-up has been but an afterthought, a hoop to jump through. I know that the work I've done with the League has been valuable. But it has been a thorn in my side for the past four years to prove to the Academy, in writing, that my work was worthwhile. My dissertation has been written twenty times over, in hundreds of pages of fieldnotes, in a short-subject documentary film, in correspondence with other scholars in the field of gay sport, in conference presentations, in gathering League archives for the Heinz History Center, and in sundry other ways I have harnessed my activist energies on behalf of the League. All those activities are where my dissertation resides. I repeat: My dissertation was all about process.

But now, I am limited. I must write a paper that fixes my dissertation process, that limits my thoughts. It will draw the gaze (the ire?) of the Academy with its ways of knowing. The Academy will decide whether this write-up passes the muster.

*The limitations of your research. Be serious, Keilan.*

I have struggled to wear the researcher's hat—to abstract myself from my position within the SCVL. As Bourdieu (1978) has said (and here I take somewhat out of context for humorous effect), “Glorification of sport as the training-ground of character, etc., always implies a certain anti-intellectualism” (p. 826). Call me stupid, but I found it distracting to distance myself from the League to theorize about my identity development. Theorizing is dumb. It's impractical. It doesn't expand the League. Action expands the League. Besides, being a product of the American public education system, an anti-intellectual whether I want to be or not, I roll my eyes at the whole academic concept of identity development, even though it is written, “The formation of a cohesive sense of identity is a cornerstone of human development throughout the entire life span” (Halpin & Allen, 2004, p. 110). Yes, but since when do we have to spend so much time trying to pinpoint identity and its development? Why can't we just let it happen, roll with it? It is only the researcher, not the insider in the culture in question, who reflects upon such lofty concepts. And, yes, I'm using the word 'lofty' ironically.

Further limitations of my research include not knowing what I was trying to find.

[T]he field-worker in collecting his [sic] material has constantly to strive after a clear idea of what he wants to know [...]. And since this idea has gradually to emerge from the evidence before him, he must constantly switch over from observation and accumulated evidence to theoretical moulding, and then back to collecting data again. (Malinowski, 1965, p. 321)



Well, I got the switching part down pat. It's the constant striving for a coherent theory, a clear idea of what I wanted to know, that stumped me. My nebulous research questions about gay identity development, well-being, and empowerment have consistently left me scratching my head, racking my brain to try and come up with something true to say about the League and its impact on the I that is Keilan Rickard. My fieldnotes didn't help much. Because I had no idea what I was looking for, I had no idea how to find it, what to write about it, or whether I had found anything at all.

### **Findings: Funny**

Have I developed as a gay man? I can only catch sight of my gay identity retrospectively, in looking at how my life course took a very gay turn upon entering the League. My goals became the League's goals (on goals, see King & Smith, 2004).

I developed as a gay man. I belonged to a community that cared for its members. I became an integral part of the community. I cared for community members. I felt a sense of empowerment. In turn, I fostered a sense of empowerment, care, integration, and belonging in others who joined. I was caught in a network, at the nexus of historical power relations through which I constituted myself as a subject, acting on others (Markula, 2003), being acted upon by others. I had fun. In turn, I helped others have fun.

I came to see that gay is old hat. I'm gay, whoopty do! The exemplars in the League couldn't care less about the fact that they're gay. And because "we are who we have related to, are relating to, and will relate to, and who has related, is relating, and will relate, to us," (D'Augelli, 1992, p. 219) I became like the people around me, not giving a

shit about my gayness half the time. My gay was no longer at issue. The banalization of gay. It's contagious!

My well-being was tied to my being part of a community. The League, like other gay orgs, was characterized by

the incredible richness of care provided by organized and informal lesbian and gay networks, the availability of personal help in most urban and even rural areas for lesbians and gay men (help that is not as easily available to heterosexual people), and the quality of care and empathy provided. (D'Augelli, 1992, p. 217)

I don't know how to argue this point any further. It seems axiomatic to me that belonging to a community, regardless of what kind, contributes to a sense of well-being and belonging. Who wouldn't agree with that? Well, in case you need further evidence, here's another citation: Halpin and Allen, 2004. Heck, I'll even give you a quote from that article: "[I]mprovements [in well-being] tend to occur as gay men reach a more integrated sense of self and develop a sense of community with other gay men" (p. 124). Thank you, Halpin and Allen. Your words are much wiser than mine.

My findings. Such a funny way of looking at what I've done with my life for the past four years. Such a funny way of reading my dissertation, as though it weren't worthwhile unless I proffered earth-shattering **FINDINGS** therein. I haven't wanted to spoon-feed you my findings or conclusions. You have already found plenty in what I've said. My writing has had an effect on you. You already drew your own conclusions from reading the previous chapters. Even before that, you had drawn conclusions. My role has been that of storyteller more than exegete. My interpretations and analyses have been few—yet another reason this dissertation sucks and I want it to end so badly I can taste it!

But I have to talk about findings. I turn the spotlight onto you, star reader. What have you found? Do you know more about gay now? If so, I've *not* done my job properly, for I've wanted to call into the question the whole notion of an essentialized gay identity; I've wanted to make you see that there's nothing about gay to be known. By constantly changing identities, wearing an array of masks, I've performed a kind of non-identity that values constant shifts, a continual reworking of identity. An askēsis of esquisses. I have wanted to demonstrate that "if there is an essential gay identity [...] it is best described as an identity that breaks heterosexual law" (Calhoun, 1993, p. 1860). Heterosexual law, academic law, same diff.

*Preach it, brother Keilan! Come on, now!*

Findings. Is gay vball now on your radar? And how's your gaydar, now that you've been exposed to me, this multiplicity of gay avatars?

Sorry for my clanging. I'm psychotic.

I have been an *agent provocateur*, eristical in my approach. Through agit-prop on behalf of gay volleyball and on behalf of lowly graduate students, my writing has worked to advance causes. If you have changed your mind on anything, that's great. I'm glad. But, as Foucault (2001) has said (in a non-canonical, non-approved transcription of a lecture),

[I]n philosophical practice, the notion of changing one's mind takes on a more general and expanded meaning since it is no longer just a matter of altering one's belief or opinion, but of changing one's style of life, one's relation to others, and one's relation to oneself. (p. 106)

Yes, I'm sure he was talking about some ancient Greco-Roman version of philosophical practice; and, yes, it's bad Foucauldianism to read in his works any trace of admiration for these ancient practices or any prescription for us to emulate them; but I still believe

it's true that if your mind has changed, then it's time for you to make some lifestyle changes, you activist reader! I'm not sure what those lifestyle changes would include and wouldn't want to prescribe anything specific. Maybe it's something as simple as reflecting on ways in which you can be more gay: having fun, being mentorly, working toward inclusion and equality, toning down that competitive spirit, camping it up, practicing an askēsis of esquisses. Or hey, maybe you could take out your checkbook and give generously to the gay volleyball movement so as to win more lost souls for the kingdom.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There are so many directions I could take this research if only the funding were easier to come by. Grant funding for qualitative research? Yeah right, especially when the qualitative research is the quality of this dissertation. If I were to receive grant funding, the proposal would have to include a salaried research assistant who could write in acceptable academic prose.

If I had ten million dollars, I would make a documentary about gay volleyball. I would travel all over the world and capture images of folks playing gay volleyball together. I would interview them and ask about their gay volleyball communities and what they have meant to members. I would interview gay volleyball celebrities like Leigh-Ann Naidoo (South Africa), J. P. Calderon (United States), and the Iron Ladies (Thailand). I would follow a gay volleyball team from some obscure country—maybe the Dominican Republic, which has a 25-year-old gay league called la Koko in Santo Domingo (Tapia, 2011)—as it prepared for the Gay Games and would document their appearance there. I would travel to California and look through the gay volleyball

archives located at U.C. Irvine to find still images to go in the documentary. While in CA, I would capture video footage of gays playing on Will Rogers State Beach, as they have done since the 1950s. I would look through Evelyn Hooker's archives for additional stories about gay volleyball back then.

Leaving CA, I would travel to Massachusetts, to the Holyoke YMCA where volleyball was created by William G. Morgan in 1895. I would look through old YMCA photos of volleyballers and would make fun of them for being gay. I would weave a hilarious argument that, because it came from the YMCA (where men used to swim naked together, for crying out loud!), volleyball has always been gay—especially when it was called mintonette.

I would interview other filmmakers who have covered gay volleyball, like Jérôme Caza, David Thorpe, and Yongyoot Thongkongtoon; and I would get their permission to use their footage in my film, although I'm not sure I would need permission because it seems like documentary can lift from others and call it 'fair use.' As long as I cite.

I would interview scholars from the field of gay sport, such as Philippe Liotard, Sylvain Ferez, Pat Griffin, Brenda Pitts, Cathy van Ingen, Andrew Parker, Eric Anderson, Dan Woog, Agnes Elling, and others I haven't thought of. I would talk with the people who operate Outsports.com and would interview Patricia Nell Warren, author of *The Frontrunner*.

I would look through arrest records in the US—particularly in locales where volleyball was likely played (on historically gay beaches, for example)—to uncover stories about early gay volleyball activity. Surely there are arrest records that include the

words ‘sodomy’ and ‘volleyball’ in the same document. Such records would be a gold mine.

All of that, and much more, would go into the making of an Oscar-winning documentary film about gay volleyball.

If I wanted to do further academic research on the benefits of gay volleyball, I would conduct a study in which I received an NIMH grant to start a league. Well, I don’t have a reputable enough CV to get an NIMH grant. So, instead, I would seduce a high-powered academe into being the first author of a grant and letting me be the second author. I might even sell out and use quantitative measurements to assess players’ well-being as a result of participation in the league. If I really wanted to be scientific, I would assign people randomly to one of two conditions: a gay volleyball group, and a gay non-volleyball group. The volleyball group would play volleyball together for two hours a week. The non-volleyball group would be a ‘treatment as usual’ group who did whatever they wanted each week instead of playing volleyball. At the end of ten weeks, I would administer various validated instruments to measure well-being, perhaps look at their sexual practices (because all research on gays must look into their sexual practices, right?), look at the alcohol and drug use, and their identity development. I would compare with pre-intervention scores and would compare the two groups using some kind of statistical tests, for which I would need to hire a statistician. The results, I predict, would be that the volleyball group would show improvements in well-being and identity development as a result of their participation in volleyball. Additionally, they would show fewer problems with alcohol and other drugs, as well as fewer incidents of risky sexual behavior as compared to the non-volleyball group (see Joseph et al., 1991). I

would publish this paper in a fancy journal and present my findings at conferences. I might be approached to write a book. And who knows, maybe Ellen DeGeneres would even have me on her show to talk about my illustrious findings.

Once the scientific world became convinced (through statistical rhetoric) that gay volleyball was a worthwhile intervention for preventing AIDS and substance abuse amongst gays, gay volleyball would be listed as a ‘best practice’ in working with gay communities at risk for HIV (see Flores et al., 2009). Gay organizations would seek funding to implement volleyball leagues throughout the US and abroad. I would write a manual on how to start up gay volleyball leagues that would earn me \$125 a pop. People would call upon me to consult with them whenever they were having problems starting their gay volleyball leagues.

Keilan, gay volleyball guru.

But no. I don’t have funding for such elaborate, narcissistic, and dreamy projects. NIMH grants require a CV sixty-nine pages long. Funding for documentary films (from the National Endowment for the Arts, for example) doesn’t go to neophytes, wannabes. Interest in gay volleyball is extremely limited, so chances are, no one cares about future research. Haven’t I said it all here?

### **Wrap it up, already**

My Lamaze partner throughout the final stages of this dissertation has coached me along, saying over and over, “Your dissertation doesn’t have to be good, it just has to be done.” S/he’s right. And I’m done.

So there you have it. Not sure if I’ve covered everything you wanted me to cover. Not sure if I’ve covered everything I wanted me to cover. But this will do. I’m tired of

writing. My baby is stillborn. I'm cutting the umbilical cord and my losses. I'm ready to move on with my life and career. Gay volleyball is fun. My gay self has developed.

You get the point.

Maybe the problem of the self is not to discover what it is in its positivity, maybe the problem is not to discover a positive self or the positive foundation of the self. Maybe our problem is now to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history. Maybe the problem is to change those technologies. And in this case one of the main political problems would be nowadays, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves. (Foucault, 1993, pp. 222-223)



## Epilogue: Are You a Homo?

By the end of Stage 3 (and if identity foreclosure has not occurred), [the person's] commitment to a homosexual self-image has increased to the point where [s/he] can say, 'I am a homosexual.' (Cass, 1979, p. 231)

It's September of 2004. My first time at the SCVL. After finishing up with the day's Skills Clinic, I'm assigned to my first ad hoc team by drawing cards. I'm so excited that I finally get to play with the big boys!

It's my turn to serve. Out of the corner of my eye, I see two guys off to my right who are whispering. Concerned they might be talking about me, I look over, prepared to glare them down if necessary.

One of the guys meets my eye contact. "Are you a homo?" he asks, giggling.

I heard him just fine, but I do that thing where you stall for time by asking the interlocutor to repeat what s/he's just said. "What?" I ask, holding a cupped hand to my ear.

The guy repeats himself, "Are you a *homo*?" this time emphasizing the word 'homo' with a limp-wrist gesture and sticking out his hip.

I'm not sure how to respond. The last time I heard this question must have been in fourth grade when I was a cheerleader, afraid of what an answer in the affirmative might mean for my sissy little hide.

But this guy. He's smiling, acting more sissy than I. So I smile back. "Yeah," I answer.

"Oh," he says and returns to his chit-chat, completely unflapped. I return to my serve, trying to appear unflapped, too.

What a queer question: Are you a homo? It took me aback. But I told him yes, as a matter of fact I am. Couldn't you tell? I mean, Hath not I gay eyes? Hath not I gay hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you fuck me, do I not bleed? Yes, I'm a homo, a cocksucking faggot. I'm a fairy. A quare. A pansy. A sexual deviant. A pervert. Depending on whom you ask.

I'm surprised he had to ask. But he did. And then went on about his life as though he'd just found out I was left-handed.

Being part of the gay League wasn't enough to let this guy know I was a homo. He had to ask. And I had to answer. Well, I don't suppose I had to answer; but I felt compelled by the laws of common courtesy: When someone asks you a question, you answer it, and honestly.

He asked me to identify myself. Who are you? He wanted to know. Who is this Keilan? I identified, in that moment, as a homo. Now he knew more about me: Keilan equals homo. Homo and Keilan are an identity. You can now substitute Keilan for homo and homo for Keilan in mathematical equations.

What's the importance of this question to the gay volleyball situation? I'm not quite sure. But my first thought is that we gays like to know who else is gay. It's nice to know who the gays are. Who are the homos? I need to know who's got my back. There's a tacit understanding amongst us homos. If I know you're a homo, I understand something about you. I can substitute you for homo in any mathematical equation. There are certain things I know about you because you're homo. I know, for example, that you've had to come out. I know that you've faced a kind of discrimination that non-heterosexuals have probably not experienced. And I know that you love Cher, once

dressed in your mother's underwear, and couldn't care less about NASCAR. You probably swish when you walk, lisp when you talk. Your wrist is limp, your loafers are light.

And that's alright with me now.

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## **Appendix: Research Summary and Theoretical Comments**

Alright, alright. Enough with the performance. The show is over. I've come out of character, makeup is off. Now we've gathered for a Q & A to ask, in all seriousness, What have we learned about the SCVL and about being gay from this research? And, perhaps the more important question, What is this research?

To begin, I would like to quote from the home page of the SCVL website, where, beneath a prominent photo of smiling League members, the organization describes itself as "a fun and friendly atmosphere for recreational and competitive volleyball among Pittsburgh's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community." Thus, my thesis—rather facile *prima facie*—is that gay volleyball is fun, a chorus I have repeated throughout this dissertation. There are several sub-arguments that run throughout my dissertation as well; but before I get to those, I would like to revisit some of the perennial practices of the SCVL and tie them back to my main point, even as I risk belaboring it.

Through Skills Clinics, the League aims to provide a fun experience for members. The Board knows that members would not have fun playing volleyball if they did not know how to play. Thus, Skills Clinics furnish an educational opportunity for players to improve their game. Along with improvement in skills come intrinsic (bodily) rewards. A sense of pleasure derives from playing one's personal best and seeing one's personal best improving week after week.

Through the team selection procedures implemented by the Board, the SCVL ensures fun by creating fair and balanced teams—none is advantaged, none disadvantaged. In the past, the spring season was not fun for League members who did not get asked to be on a team. This unpleasant practice was reminiscent of elementary

school playgrounds where the less sporty among us got ‘picked last.’ Thus, in 2008, the Board implemented a change in the structure of the League: They began creating all the teams. This they did behind closed doors so that the potential for hurting people’s feelings as they ranked them by skill level was minimized.

Through the team naming ritual, we see the League having fun. Teams celebrate perversity as they come up with names that are both ‘clever’ and ‘scandalous.’ Pleasure derives from the *jouissance* of getting away with team names that push the envelope. Ultimately, the more clever and scandalous the team name, the more likely it will succeed in soliciting the laughter of other League members. For example, Volley-vous couchez avec moi? I can hardly keep a straight face when I say it.

The team huddle and cheer provide further opportunities for fun within the League. During the huddle, team members greet one another, crack jokes, yuck it up. They put their hands together in a stack and unite their voices behind a cheer, which, ineffably, cheers them up. We saw that there is no place for a sullen attitude during the team huddle. Any lack of fun must be corrected.

Team mentors are there to remedy any lack of fun. In a letter from the Board to mentors, I was informed of my expectation to promote a positive attitude in the League. I was to guard against folks who might discourage newbies or otherwise thwart their fun. My fellow mentors and I, like nurses, were to ‘take the pulse’ of teammates by asking if they were having fun. If they weren’t, this was a disease that needed to be cured.

As we can see, then, the practices I have chosen to highlight in my dissertation corroborate the League’s self-description as fun. But what does fun have to do with being gay and with my research?

Fun, merriment, and cheer are synonymous with gayness. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that being *a* gay is always fun or that all gays do is have fun.

Furthermore, I do not mean to imply that if you have fun, you are a gay or that if I do not have fun, I am no longer a gay. Rather, I invoke the definition of gayness as fun in order to reclaim it as a marker for gay identity, all the while acknowledging how much work is required to fashion such a character. As a group, the SCVL promotes a fun image of itself and implements League practices, strategies, and techniques that shape its members into gay selves that are fun.

In writing my dissertation, I have attempted to perform the kind of fun that gays (stereo/proto)typically have. Although I cannot say that it is true for all gays, I can say that a gay aesthetic (not *the* gay aesthetic) prizes mordant humor. Irreverence and iconoclasm are what camp is built upon. As Perez (2011) observes in his study of volleyballers in Peru, when gays come together we enter a ‘joking relationship,’ holding court, ‘reading’ one another. Such performances have become a staple of gay culture, from drag shows to Scrabble games at friends’ homes. Thus, as I wrote my dissertation about a particular gay subculture, I wanted my writing itself to perform this distinctively campy style of fun. If there have been lapses, if my accent has been off at times, perhaps it is because in my real life I have not mastered camp. My simulacrum (of a simulacrum) still lacks subtlety.

### **Sub-Arguments**

In addition to my observations on gay volleyball being fun, I have followed several other threads throughout my dissertation. The most salient of these threads has been the interface between Keilan the gay volleyballer and Keilan the graduate student. I

have thought of myself as a kind of travel memoirist who has spent time in a foreign culture and is using the dissertation to report back on the things I have seen, done, and learned. What sets my report apart from other kinds of memoirs or ethnographies, however, is that I became a complete insider in the culture. Perhaps it is a strong statement to say that I was a ‘complete’ insider, but I believe it is true. Having been part of the League for four years before my research year began, I was a veteran in the League. I was asked to be a mentor, a role reserved for those who embody the League ethos and have demonstrated a commitment to its values. I was entrusted with the task of running a League committee and with planning an important (and historical) event. At the end of my research year, I was even elected to the Board. I was as much of an insider as one could be.

Given my position as insider, I felt an allegiance to the SCVL and a responsibility to represent the League accurately, respectfully. These were my friends (practically family) I was writing about. They were not data points to be exploited for my benefit or that of the Academy. Even to analyze our experiences felt wrong somehow. To subject League knowledge to academic ways of knowing, to force the League to speak truths it did not speak about itself, to ask questions of the League it did not ask itself seemed tantamount to colonialism—the imperialist’s way of surveying a culture only to learn how to change it for the betterment of the empire. To educate the primitives, clothe the natives was never my intent. Rather, I sought—especially in the sections of my dissertation that deal with League practices—to describe the SCVL in its own terms and to value its knowledge for what it could teach the Academy. Not the other way around.

In addition to feeling like a League representative, I felt like an ambassador of the larger gay culture. As such, I was reticent to disclose occult knowledge, privileged information about gays to the Academy. Through the use of irony, I tried to speak about being gay in a way that was both true and not true. That is, I essentially winked at gays, making no effort to explicate our winks, keeping our secrets secret. For example, in asking the question, What makes gay volleyball gay? I never arrived at an answer that the Academy would find satisfactory. This is because I did not want to essentialize, unify, universalize, or reify gayness. I toyed with answering the question by saying things like, gay volleyball is gay because those who play it speak with a lisp, prance about, stick their hips out, and so on. These descriptions, however, simply played on stereotypes about gay culture even as they resisted them. And while it is true that you will find people at the SCVL who speak with the stereotypical gay accent, prance about, stick their hips out, and so on, it is not true that these practices make gay volleyball gay, though they certainly set us apart from our straight counterparts. What makes gay volleyball gay is that we do not ask what makes gay volleyball gay. Within the League, there is a tacit knowledge of gayness that need not problematize itself. It is only when Keilan the graduate student interfaces with Keilan the gay volleyballer that the question, What makes gay volleyball gay? becomes possible. A straightforward answer, however, is not.

Being an insider in the League made it difficult for me to extricate myself and play the outsider. Nowhere was this more evident than in my decision not to interview League members. Although my friends and the Board knew I was researching the League and were supportive of my research, when I would ask them to consider granting an interview, my subtle shift from insider to outsider came with a commensurate shift in



their facial expression. I interpreted their facial expression as discomfort with the academic gaze, penetrating the safe space of the SCVL, exploiting Leaguers and their ways of knowing.

The interface between Keilan the volleyballer and Keilan the graduate student also led to difficulties in knowing what questions to ask of my League experience. After all, when I played volleyball I was not focused on academic questions. Rather, an experience-near reading of my time with the SCVL would have focused more on questions about whether my skills were improving, whether I had played my best that day, whether so and so from the League might be free on Friday night to go see the latest movie, or how to prepare for my next committee meeting and raise money for the League event I was planning. As my academic self interfaced with my League self, I began to ask how and whether my identity development as a gay man was impacted by the League. These questions posed by Keilan the graduate student proved difficult to answer, especially because I was trying to remain true to the emic knowledge of Keilan the volleyballer. Nevertheless, I managed to arrive at some ‘findings’ with regard to gay identity development, which I will discuss further below.

In addition to the theme of volleyball Keilan meets grad student Keilan, there were other sub-arguments that I developed throughout the dissertation. Returning to the self-description of the SCVL found on the home page of its website, we see that the League provides a ‘friendly atmosphere.’ Such an atmosphere fostered a feeling that I belonged, that I was welcomed and included. The SCVL is intentional about implementing practices and strategies aimed at shaping the League into a friendly place. The Skills Clinics are supportive and nurturing in their approach, rather than critical or

harsh. The team huddle and cheer foster camaraderie, an *esprit de corps* amongst teammates which contributes to the development of team cohesion and bonding, even what I have called ‘tribal’ customs. Working to ensure that inequities are minimized, the Board puts together teams that are fair and balanced. In short, the League seeks to be welcoming of all, regardless of skill level, race, sexuality, or gender expression.

I have argued in my dissertation that the League’s push to be inclusive of everyone is a response to the common experience of gay people having been excluded from society. In an effort to find support for our ‘deviant tendencies,’ we group together with our semblables (Leznoff & Westley, 1956, p. 257). What makes us semblable, however, has nothing to do with the kinds of sex we have or clothes we wear or phrases we say. In fact, any researcher would be hard pressed to find any behavioral marker common to all League members. Rather, what makes us semblable is our collective experience of abjection. We come together under the aegis of being castaways, what we refer to in shorthand as ‘gay.’

Another sub-theme I have followed throughout my dissertation has been a tongue-in-cheek soteriology of gay volleyball. The promise of the SCVL is salvation from a life of gloom and loneliness through fun and friendship. The god(dess) we worship, Fagra, whose will we divine, calls for us to promote equality. Devotees spread the good news and work to expand the kingdom of gay volleyball. We are justified in manifesting our destiny because we have all tasted and seen that gay volleyball is good. We testify through our films, such as *Gay volleyball saved my life*, or the SCVL-produced, eschatological *More than volleyball*. The team name ‘Vollelujah!’ offers praise. We congregate on Sundays to work out our salvation—developing our skills, for example—

in community with one another. As a member of this community, I was but a part of the body, an “errant particle of the Divine” (see Halperin, 1995, p. 74). My will was subsumed by the greater will of the SCVL.

Finally, a sub-theme that ran through my dissertation was gay identity development. My argument—although not easy to trace in a linear fashion—ended up being two pronged. The first prong is encapsulated in the preceding paragraph where I talk about my individual subjectivity being subsumed by the SCVL. By aligning myself with a gay cause, I was used in the service of gayness. Helping the League with its expansion project became my *idée fixe*, my constant obsession. As a result, I disciplined myself in accordance with this cause; and my behaviors, thoughts, and feelings were devoted to it, resulted from it, worked toward it. The gay cause overtook me. I took on gay.

The second prong of my argument regarding gay identity development corroborates Cass’ (1979) famous model. Through the League, what I noticed about my gay identity is that it became banal, old hat. When I first entered the League, the gayness of it all was glaringly obvious to me. However, the veteran League members did not appear to notice or care about gayness. They had practically forgotten they were gay. As I spent more time in the League I, too, stopped noticing the gayness or caring about it. At the League, my focus was on the sport of volleyball itself and on the friendships I formed. In my dissertation, then, the banality of gayness is reflected in my frequent lack of attention to it. Instead, I concern myself with the everydayness of volleyball: our boring t-shirts, our ‘good game’ ritual, skill building, and reffing duties. Although our practices were infused with gayness, I was so inured to it that it was virtually invisible.

## **Autoethnographic Methodology**

Needless to say, my dissertation pushes the limits of acceptable scholarly writing. Using autoethnography, with an emphasis on the –graphy, I challenge the style vs. substance binary. For me, the substance of my dissertation *is* the style and its impact on the reader. I have sought to stir up the reader in an effort to shift the culture of the Academy, all the while recognizing that this is risky business. After multiple drafts, the final product has been toned down significantly. Still, though, it remains intentionally controversial and perverse with the intent of provoking thought.

The content of my dissertation draws from fieldnotes. During the fall 2008 and spring 2009 seasons of the SCVL, I went home after playing each week to write down whatever came to mind. Most of the time, I said at least a few words about what happened at the SCVL that week; but there were times my entries became writing exercises, maquettes, harebrained theorizing that would eventually fall by the wayside. I maintain, however, that every jot and tittle of my fieldnotes are valuable on some front, whether or not they were usable in the dissertation proper. They form a gestalt, a corpus, an archive of my time with the SCVL and all the reflection thereon. In my final write-up, mostly the portions of my fieldnotes that told stories were included. The rest will forever be a memoir for me.

In addition to utilizing fieldnotes, the content of my dissertation draws from literature review as well as League documents and emails. With such a rich variety of texts informing my dissertation, I felt justified in not bothering League members for interviews. Like Foucault, I was concerned with *l'énoncé*, the ‘what’s been said’ about the subject in question.

In the end, I recognize how difficult it will be for an academic reader to evaluate my dissertation. If the reader is looking for facts and information, s/he will find some. If s/he seeks theory, there is some to be found. If the reader wants sound bytes to cite in future works, I have provided a few zingers to choose from. If the reader wishes to take issue with my writing, there is plenty to debate. I would suggest, however, that the best way to approach my dissertation is not with a spirit of judgment but with merriment and mirth instead. May you be gay as you read.

### **A Few Words on Foucault**

In this dissertation, I have not tried to be an expositor of Foucault. I have not tried to speak perfect Foucauldese in order to explicate the League, especially when it would have been a stretch to do so. Instead, I have borrowed loosely from some of his thoughts without quoting heavily from his work. He has remained my silent theoretical touchstone, my *Quelle*.

In Foucault, I find my license to think differently about the given practices of the Academy. He has encouraged me to problematize academic rhetoric—the tricks of the trade that make academes sound like they are in the know—so that I might “free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (Foucault, 1985/1990, p. 9). He has granted me permission to problematize the academic hierarchical structure wherein graduate students are not in a position to make the kinds of statements and observations I have made. He has told me it is even okay if I do not agree with him—a consummate academe—on certain issues or if I call him out for being difficult to understand. Such freedom to think differently has empowered me to speak in a voice I can believe in.

Although I was careful not to impose Foucault where he did not apply, it followed naturally from my reading of his work that I should broaden my understanding of the League through some of his main concepts. First, I drew from Foucault's archaeology as I paid attention to taxonomizing procedures. The League's Skills Clinics are primarily educational in their intent. However, they simultaneously function as an assessment device that helps determine what type of player each person is and in which division—recreational or competitive—s/he should go. Thus, the Skills Clinics point to a grid of specification within this (micro-)discursive formation of the SCVL.

Foucault's archaeology was also influential in my distinguishing League knowledge from academic—especially 'Queer'—knowledge. Although I am not convinced we need to make too much of a distinction between his use of the verbs *connaître* and *savoir* (according to my reading of his *Archéologie du savoir*, he is inconsistent in how he uses them and does not bother to overly define either term), I recognize that there is a difference between how the League talks about itself and how the Academy would want (me) to talk about the League. The *préalable* of the League, our tacit knowledge, the intangibilia (if you'll pardon my neologism) that guides how we act cannot be overlaid with academic discourse without changing the concepts, objects, and grids of specification that structure our League.

Second, drawing from Foucault's genealogy, I have looked at relations of power. However, I departed slightly from Foucault's conceptualization of power as nowhere localized because I wanted to remain true to my emic knowledge which sees power as incarnate, as located in terminal forms or nodes. Within the League, the Board clearly exercises authority over the general membership. Board decisions act upon League

members' actions. Referees exercise power over players. They have the final say when it comes to the truth of a point. Mentors display power. They run interference when would-be mentors threaten to discourage newbies, for example. My challenge to Foucault, then, in pushing him to be more relevant to the needs of activists who seek to resist powerful regimes, was to speak more plainly about where power resides. He might retort that power resides nowhere; rather, it circulates within and among subjects and institutions. Again, I would find it more practical to pinpoint these subjects and institutions in order to counter them more strategically.

Finally, I have drawn from Foucault's study of ethics to broaden my understanding of identity development within the League. Reflecting on my role as team mentor, I sought to bring myself in line with the League ethos of fun and friendliness. I disciplined myself in accordance with League expectations. Giving myself over to the Iron Ladies event, I lost myself to a larger cause. At the same time, I put my academic self to use on behalf of the League. As a result, I self-consciously fashioned myself into a person whose ambitions and actions served a greater gay purpose. Striving to make the world a gayer place, I embodied gayness and developed as a gay man.